

FLUTE, FAR AND NEAR

Betty Trask



"I shall look out
eagerly for her next book"

Evening Standard

Here it is!



HS



Perditus Liber Presents

the rare



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Flute, Far and Near

By

Betty Trask

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CONTENTS

Prelude
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
About the Author

PRELUDE

THE hall was full of bustle. People running all about it, asking each other if that would do, now? Over the slippery polished oak boards of the hall floor, people ran, if they knew them—slid, and slipped, if they didn't; but, whatever happened, they kept up the sort of conversation suited to a wedding.

Bessie's wedding to-morrow. How everyone was going to enjoy it! Although, to be sure, even in 1873, bridesmaids could be found to deplore a bridegroom, constantly mistaken by strangers, for Papa.

It was best to fix one's slippery attention on Bessie.

Bessie, at, dear me, almost five and twenty. What a good thing she was going to be married at last!

Bessie, buxom, bonnie, rather bouncing.

What a bright colour Bessie had to-day! What a splendid air of enjoyment! With what hearty good will Bessie pursued festivity into chill, remote corners of dark passages, even

5

down into the cellar to hold a candle to Papa very busy with his ceremonial pipe of white port.

"That'll do, my dear," said Papa, always kindly, even with a crimson cranium from his portly efforts.

Down in the cellar, spiders, with their shadows, ran from the quivering festivity of Bessie's candle. Bessie, realizing what a sad, uncomfortable place the cellar always is, ran up its chill steps again, blowing out her candle, leaving poor dear Papa, quite carelessly, in the dark.

Papa came up from the cellar, brushing tags of cobweb from his little round knees. Shaking his head, bumping it, too ... but never scolding to-day ... now Bessie is the Bride.

And, bless me, to be sure, what a great noise the bridal Bessie was making! Positively shouting, at first one, then the other. Joking her bridesmaids, and their arch hopes of marriage, too. And, almost improperly, jollying the gentlemen, those gentle shepherd-plaided cousins, all mild behaviour behind militant moustaches, who had come to assist dear Bessie's maiden steps into Mr. Lemander's arms.

But then Bessie always enjoyed such fine, high spirits. Such abounding health. Such rebounding jokes.

6

Bessie's jokes, indeed, had a habit of bounding about, digging people in the ribs, hitting people under the chin.

Bounding back again to be relished by Bessie, herself. Such a girl was a real treat in a country town.

In her own, Bessie, daughter of the richest inhabitant, could have picked and chosen and picked again.

Dear me! Why pick Mr. Lemander?

Little Mr. Lemander? Good, worthy, well-muffled Mr. Lemander.

Her father's partner, in business, age, habit and portly enjoyment?

Still, there you are! Cupid will call even in a chest-protector.

The rogue can be as dangerous, seen through spectacles, over a pew in chapel, as ever the saucy creature clad in a small quiver and one carefully arranged arrow.

So Bessie was going to wed elderly Mr. Lemander, who didn't quite catch her jokes, only laughed heartily when other people caught them rather too hard.

And, perhaps, Bessie, at five and twenty, might have done worse, if undoubtedly better. For dear Papa, dearest Mamma, sad as the thought is, cannot live for ever. Mamma constantly speaks of a comfortable coffin. Papa,

7

finishing the port, himself has been heard to say there's an end to all things.

And there's Jane, not married, either, at past twenty-three....

And Mr. Lemander is so sensible. So sober. Papa's port does nothing but warm the expression turned towards Bessie, behind his glasses.

A warm man, Mr. Lemander, so they say. Well off. Well intentioned.

One well able to cope with this world, not afraid to consider the next....

One who will make a Good Husband, and, in time, a Good Fa ... dear, dear. What are we saying? And Bessie, not even married yet.... Only just leaving all the aunts and cousins in the hall, as she runs so lightly, so laughingly, upstairs....

* * * * *

Bessie ran upstairs in a perfect bustle.

A perfect bustle, indeed, could be sighted, vanishing at the most tremendous rate round the bend of the stairs.

Bessie ran up, never stopping for anything. Certainly not to look out of the stairway window, to the garden, stiff, lonely, unfamiliar, menacing the pale sky with branches, like witch-arms casting a spell. Out to the strange chill garden holding back all its charms from Bessie's winter wedding.

8

A canary hung in the stairway window. A tiny cowslip ball, balanced on a perch.

Jane's canary, indifferently asleep, careless of all the jollity, and joking, going on beneath its cage.

Bessie ran past it, in her tremendous bustle.

She ran up the stairs, right past Mamma's room. Dearest Mamma. From her room came a murmur. Dear, kind Mamma, engaged in there with Sarah Withall, excellent, respectful soul, who had been Bessie's and Jane's nurse, devoted to Mamma's service and sensibilities. Sarah always appeared on any occasion. She understood Mamma so well. Papa, too, of course, but chiefly Mamma, how her admirable feelings exacted the greatest attention. How she should be the centre of everything.

Wear wider, stiffer, more spreading skirts than anyone else.

Hold the baby at christenings, quite over-power the font.

Take the centre seat of a wedding group. With her skirt arranged right over the bride's.

Be first after the coffin, at funerals. Where her delightful decorum quite shrouded any interest in the dear departed.

Dearest Mamma. Of course Jane was her favourite. Slight, delicate Jane, so easily set aside, out of the way.

9

Bessie, now ... her manner, sometimes pert, her splendid young health just a trifle rude.... Dear Mamma liked delicacy. A closed eye. A cut-glass smelling-bottle, well within reach....

Now, this morning, Bessie must own to herself, how her bridal behaviour had, possibly, been a little trying for Mamma.... Mamma was really more comfortable, perhaps, closeted with dear old Sarah, fitting her wonderful, new wedding lace cap.

Her elegant, beaded mantle ...

How well Mamma would look!

How superior, how splendid, how temperate, untouched, chill....

Papa, dear Papa, of course, might redden, rustle his new boots, or his hat. Choke or blow his nose over a fatherly tear....

But Mamma would behave so wonderfully well....

Bessie went on upstairs, a little more slowly. After all, what reason was there to hurry herself right out of breath? She would need all her breath for that "I will" to-morrow. For all the willing devotion necessary to reward Mr. Lemander, through their life together afterwards.

No hurry. No hurry ...

With Mr. Lemander ... no need to hurry.

10

"My dear Henry," whispered Bessie, standing still beside, the old schoolroom globe, wasting its manifold information on the half-landing, just below the girl's bedroom floor.

Oh! dear me! But it was cold on the half-landing. That splendid and roaring fire down in the hall could do nothing here. And, although it was quite early morning, and Bessie, right up at the top of the house, how oddly dark the air seemed!

No light, cheerful brightness about it. A queer dull frostiness. No sparkle ... Chill ... Bessie, of course, had wanted a winter wedding.

Anything rather than a long wait right into the Spring. But there is something closed, stiff, a sense of treasure locked away in winter.

What nonsense. Talk of absurd ideas. And pretty reflections for a bustling bride! What a silly girl Bessie was, to be sure! And ungrateful, too. Why, her mind should be steadily set on nothing but her own good fortune and her own dear Henry.

Dear, dear. Providence would be putting a rod into its own especial pickle for her, if she went on in this fanciful, unbridal way.

Bessie, so blessed above others ... all her

11

bridesmaids, with no ghost of a husbandly waistcoat between them.

"Fact before Fancy." How many times had Bessie copied out that engaging sentiment, with special attention to nice, flowing capital "F's"?

How many times?

It was cold, standing there on the half-landing beside the old schoolroom globe. Really cold. No use denying that.

And silent, too. Not a sound could be heard of the junketing going on in the hall down below. The voices had all died to an odd murmur. Then died away. How silent the house was! Why, right up here, no one would have guessed at wedding festivities going forward.

Bessie put out one finger, and spun the globe beside her. Sent it swinging round, Asia and America chasing each other giddily through zone after zone. The globe went round to the sound of agreeable, intestinal rattlings that had always made it a pleasure to spin, even in far-off schoolroom days....

The Use of the Globe had always been to enjoy a secret titter, passed from Bessie to Jane, at its elderly mutters and rumblings.

They had naughtily called it "Uncle Davis."

12

What pleasant times they had had!

What absurd, silly things they had said and done! How far off were those times, those absurdities ... now Bessie was being married to-morrow....

Oh! It *was* quiet and cold up here.

* * * * *

A change seemed to have crept over the house. The house (was it some movement of frost of low-hanging cloud outside?), the whole house looked grey as though wrapped in a veil ... a veil, entirely unlike a bride's. Bessie put one hand on the stair-rail. She took it off to see the grey ghost mark of a hand vanish, finger by finger.

What a lot of nonsense, all these silly feelings did show, to be sure!

Bessie burst out singing, put her hand to her adult hair braids, warm and neatly piled. Picked up her skirt, and ran, singing, upstairs, along the narrow passage towards her own bedroom.

How very narrow the passage was!

Never before had Bessie noticed how the walls each side of it seemed to lean forward, as if to enclose one.

Her bedroom was right at the end of the passage, with Jane's smaller one just beside it. Now Bessie was marrying, Jane would be

13

promoted to what Mamma had already spoken of as “Bessie’s old room.”

Just a very little queer to feel that one had no longer any right to anything except what was shadowed by one’s husband’s wing.

... Dear, dear Henry ... How one was going to delight in devoting all one’s thoughts and feelings entirely to him! ...

Bessie’s own bedroom ... how strangely it looked already, with all those bandboxes scattered, in unreprieved nuptial disarray, all about the floor, even upon the bed, all over the best counterpane.

A splendid time had Bessie enjoyed, trying on, packing, altering, packing again. A delightful, bustling business, only the room looked so odd and strange, afterwards. Just like a room in a foreign country, little related. to what it had sheltered before.

Bessie found herself pausing outside the door. Almost as if she were going to knock upon it....

Now, again Bessie could see all those open bandboxes through a crack. She hesitated. Stopped singing. Herself stopped.

Opposite Bessie’s old bedroom was the box-room. It was generally locked, since Mamma stored her home-made jams and jellies on some shelves there.

14

A few boxes were stacked in it, and a quantity of those things that no one can recall in ordinary daily intercourse. Where, on earth, that backless chair had been? From whence in the world that square of carpet had arrived there? The old children’s toys had got into a basket and hidden in a corner. A large wardrobe hid one of the discoloured walls ... the nursery rocking-horse took up most of the bare board space.

Bessie looked at the box-room door.

“Now, I wonder if dear Mamma has remembered the second pot of strawberry jam she spoke of, so particularly, this morning?”

Bessie opened the box-room door, and went in.

* * * * *

There is no possibility of introducing festivity into a box-room.

It is as though all those strange, wrecked and unwanted objects that collect there, produce some dreary power, at war with human pleasantry or comfort.

The dull, cold air of the box-room met Bessie as suddenly as a slap.

How queer it all looked!

No, not queer ... only rather brooding ... and Bessie, bouncing in, felt as though she had interrupted something....

She stared all about her, seeing the shelves

15

of jam, the stacked shepherd's hut trunks, the mark on the discoloured wall-paper where her own shepherd's hut had been lifted away.

The old rocking-horse stood as ever.

Through the broken basket she could see the brightness of Jane's old yellow wooden nine-pins.

The large wardrobe ...

There was nothing to interrupt. What could ever go on here?

All the lost discarded things stood, bereft, despised, rejected of life, that breaks, and never stops to mend.

Only the dull, cold air lent them an odd little shiver of movement. Had the excellence of her upbringing been impairable, Bessie could have sworn that the rubbed old rocking-horse did actually rock a little through the desolate air.

Bessie looked sharply from side to side. Too eagerly to remember how foolishly she was behaving. Had that box moved, behind her? Was that mark, like a shadow, always over the wall in that far corner?

Could it be that Mamma's best bandbox was slipping down over that funny old backless chair?

No. It was true. The box-room looked very odd, indeed. Bessie, staring at object

16

after object, could easily have declared they were all making fun of her. Cold fingers, pointing, just as she turned her head away.

Little streaks of shadows, like fingers ...

Everything in it had seemed so still. Now, nothing seemed still at all.

Objects, immovable, as long as Bessie could remember, suddenly, mocking, moving, behind, not in front of, her ...

Even the placid jams and jellies on Mamma's shelves, alive and menacing with goblin workings.

What had happened to the box-room?

Nonsense! Nonsense!

Could Nonsense be having its way, here?

Bessie, in a panic, ran to the door. Then, turning, suddenly saw everything quite differently.

* * * * *

The box-room, quiet, familiar. Everything, dull, discarded, just as usual. No movement anywhere, not a shadow.

No nonsense.... Bessie held the door-handle in her hand. Held it tightly.... Well, she was a funny girl! Fancy! Now she didn't want to go! And leave the poor, chill, blank little box-room to its loneliness. The rocking-horse to indifference. Jane's bright skittles to dullness. All the battered objects—which had served, so faithfully, so

17

well—to ignorance, forgetfulness, the end of life—nothing....

Bessie was going to be married to-morrow. She was going away into a new life, protected by Mr. Lemander's waistcoat. A life in which Bessie's excellent, bustling intentions would shine as brightly, and against as suitable a setting, as ever Mr. Lemander's gold watch-chain upon that waistcoat.

Bessie was going to be perfectly happy. She was about to become a Good Wife, a helpmeet, possibly, in some exalted moment, a Guiding Star. Mr. Lemander has said something of the sort—how eagerly he would follow her—that last time he sat down to Backgammon with Papa, warmly wrapping a rug round his knees.

Eagerly did Bessie anticipate the future and its celestial dispositions.

Warmly, warmly did Bessie's heart glow, in quite an earthly way, for Henry.

... Why linger in a cold, silly box-room, on the very day before her wedding? ... There was nothing at all in the box-room.... Bessie had opened the box-room door, widely, to the familiar look of the landing outside. She trod and slipped upon the fur mat that, with its fellows, kept a possible draught from slinking under every door in the house. Then Bessie suddenly remembered—her Doll——

18

She hadn't played with it since the age of twelve. And that, according to Mamma, had been too old for such childish games. She hadn't even seen it since the spring-cleaning before last, nor thought of it since....

The Doll was here. Put away in the great wardrobe. Of course she oughtn't to have kept it at all. It should, long ago, have been given away to Some Poor Child. But it never had been. Partly, that was because of Jane. Who seldom spoke, but had, one day, without warning, remarked in her frosty little voice that always seemed to come out of a corner of the room behind her, "Uncle Davis might grieve, Mamma, could he know that dear Bessie had not treasured the beautiful doll he so kindly gave her."

The fact that Uncle Davis had recently repaired to a handsome tomb naturally inclined Mamma to some suitable tears, and, almost, a belief that Uncle Davis was speaking to her again through the lips of Jane, her favourite child.

Anyway, the Doll had never gone. Just been laid away in its lovely little bonnet, and the dress Jane made. Jane, who had never cared for the Doll. Only watched it, remotely, rocking in Bessie's arms.

Had Jane cared for dolls? Or animals?

19

Or anything? Jane never said. Only sat so quietly. Kept her clothes clean, so commendably. Listened to her elders, never once interrupting....

The Doll was still here. Quite queer to think that, however one advanced.

Stepping up into maturity, arranging round one's shoulders the mantle of responsibility and wifhood, still the Doll was here, just the same, laid gently away in its lovely little bonnet, and the dress Jane made.

That the Doll, in its drawer, would stay behind, ignorant, and waxen, always smiling its set smile, while one walked importantly into the unknown.

Bessie went up to the wardrobe and pulled open a drawer. She lifted up a swathing apron, rustled several sheets of delicate paper. Someone had put away the Doll with great care....

There it was! Lying there, smiling. Its clever, real-lashed eyes closed. So beautifully dressed, just as when she had last played with it. How well Jane sewed! See its dress with those minute tucks....

Bessie stood quite still, looking down at the Doll. Another odd fancy sweeping over her. The Doll lay so calmly, waiting, smiling. Looking, somehow, just as if it knew things no one else suspected.

20

Instead of looking like a discarded toy, very nearly given away, the Doll seemed like a live creature, with thoughts of its own, barely concealed.

It went on smiling. It would go on smiling long after to-morrow, the wedding breakfast, the coach-ride to London—the wedding tour.... It would always be smiling, unless someone broke it ... unless children broke it. A rough, roguish little child, impatient of smiling wax.

Never before had Bessie dared look into the future. To consider possible babies was by no means a reflection Mamma or Miss Minnings would approve. Hardly nice ... although every girl naturally hopes to have children. And how difficult to combine hope and no single thought upon the subject.

Now, quite recklessly, Bessie thought and hoped passionately.

She thought of babies, dear little unquenchable creatures, who would smash anything they touched, before one could be after them. She thought of reproof, too late, quite useless, with pink wax fragments all over the floor.

* * * * *

Still, the Doll went on smiling. The Doll, a toy for children. Still,. Bessie went on wishing for children to destroy it.

21

Just as though a doll were not a toy for children, after all, but a symbol, quite strong, quite unbreakable of some thing even Mr. Lemander's bride could not put away....

Why hadn't Mamma given away this silly Doll of Bessie's, after all?

* * * * *

A little shiver ran over the cold box-room. Bessie turned quickly, bumping an elbow against the shabby, ferocious nostrils of the old rocking-horse.

"Why, Jane! What a great surprise you gave me! Upon my word, Jane ..."

The word died off in the cold box-room. A rustle of paper made its dirge. Bessie, pushing and urging, tried to shut the Doll's drawer in the wardrobe and open another before Jane noticed.... For Jane had better not see—anything that might make her wonder whether the very day before her wedding, Bessie was not behaving rather funnily. Looking into a drawer that held nothing but a toy, forgotten, of course, by Bessie, long ago.

Funny behaviour, anything out of the ordinary, was—well, not what people approved....

“Come along, Jane,” commanded Bessie. “I would like you to help me look in this drawer for that tartan ribbon, dear Mamma said ...”

22

A great bustle Bessie was making in the tartan ribbon drawer. Pulling dear Mamma’s piece-bag about with bridal authority.

Jane, at the door, stood still.

“Do not distress yourself, Bessie. When you are gone, I will see no harm comes to the Doll. I will look after it, always, I promise you...”

Jane’s frosty little voice seemed to come from the landing behind her. It seemed to have no relation to Jane, her bustle and flounced ribbons, her neatly piled straw braids, her blank, round white face. “My dear Bessie. I never forget.”

“My dear Jane, what can you be thinking of? Not that old Doll poor Uncle Davis gave me, so long ago? Why—I assure you, Jane, I’d quite forgotten ...”

Bessie had bustled up to Jane at the door of the box-room. She was smiling in an elder-sisterly way. “Why, my dear Jane ...” They were both outside now. Jane held out a key.

“Will you wait while I lock the door, Bessie? Dear Mamma asked me to do so. In all her hurry she put the key on to her own bunch, after getting out the jam this morning.”

Jane had vanished round the corner of the landing on her way downstairs. Bessie was

23

going into her own room to get on with her packing. She stood for only one minute outside the locked box-room door, listening to the whisper of Jane’s flounced ribbons as they brushed over the good Brussels stair-carpet. All at once there was tremendous activity about Bessie’s bustle. Suddenly it could be seen at a strange angle while Bessie leaned over the stairs.

“Jane! One minute, Jane....! You need not think it at all odd of me if I just ask you ... pray, Jane,’ do not forget to let me know, should dear Mamma again think it best at any time to give away the ...”

There was a great bustle down in the hall.

The wedding party, back there again, after a busy time doing the flowers and wreaths in the drawing-room.

No time for foolishness now. Only just time for Bessie to go downstairs at a great pace, back to all the wedding gaiety.

Chapter One

NOW it was dark, quite dark.

The houses wrapped contentedly into the shadows, against which, so lately, they had been protesting. All the shop-windows stung into display.

The shining darkness of the road under the bus, pierced, and pierced again with gold rapiers.

The curved point of Flute's chestnut hair made a question-mark against her cheek. She tossed it over her coat collar, and rang the bell, that stopped the bus, that let one down into the street, into the way to the shop, for one's fancy built.

Flute was feeling just a little excited. It was always an adventure for Flute to leave home, when no one knew it. Nurse had always steadily refused to allow Flute to leave her side. And it was barely a year since Nurse had, herself, left Flute's. Since then Mum had made daily material inquiries into Flute's plans, although she had not always listened, in reply.

But, really, since Flute's marriage, poor Mum had been too taken up with all the awkwardness, of the Terrible Thing that had ended in Flute, a widow by ten minutes, and so, back on Mum's hands, again, just the same as ever. Not to mention the flood of social sympathy this awkwardness had provoked.

Now, poor Mum reminded herself of Flute's widowhood, every afternoon, before starting

25

out to Bridge, and left Flute to her own, and presumably widowed, devices.

So being out, by oneself, was still an adventure.

To begin with, it was lovely to lose oneself in a crowd. Flute welcomed the dark, indifferent bumps of absorbed Christmas shoppers. The wide, blocked pavements were too busy to question a slip of a girl in a thick black coat meeting a hat pulled down, like a wishing-cap, to bring its owner invisibility. What did Flute matter to the world on those wide, blocked pavements of absorbed London town?

And, by way of them, Flute strolled back again into the Child's Land of Romance.

...London is such a wonderful place for children. The least of street urchins knows fairyland round any corner, especially at Christmas-time. And anyone can be a child again, in a stifled street, just for the worth of a look of wonder in his eyes.

Flute, here and now, a child, crossed the gold-pierced road, and slipped round shoulders on her way to the windows, full of the only things she had ever treasured, except her own fancies.

Toys.

There they were. As always at Christmas-time. Glorious, omnipotent, inevitable. Conquerors of the world, undismayed by their

26

pygmy reflections in weary eyes, outside the window.

Bears, railways, balls, comicalities ... Dolls.

Flute caught her breath. The Dolls. How she loved them! Chiefly in the abstract, for she had never attained an expensive specimen, and Mum's interest in hospitals, always socially active, had yearly swept all her own away.

Nearly every Christmas, one especial Doll had glittered with promise, in some shop-window corner, and, in course of festivity's passing, vanished again.

Never into Flute's arms.

Why, only last year ... and now, this year, here was Flute, her heart losing a beat, just as ever, on finding those wonderful creatures, so near yet so far.

Just like a child, did Flute, a widow, press round, gaping shoulders to a corner of shop-window, warm from the fights within.

Then Flute gave a sigh of decision.

In and up, now to the Christmas Toy Fair... Through the silk department Flute went, past the luxurious waterfalls of velvet and brocade, at a patter. Turning her head away from elegant designs marked "exclusive," and reminding Flute of trousseau wares.

Through the "silver goods" Flute nearly ran. Remembering fish-slicers, cake-knives and

27

grape-scissors, all the silvered nuptial necessities with which Edward's many friends had served him, wisely and too well....

Flute did not really feel easy again until she got out of a very hot lift, and heard a musical box, playing....

She gave the little gasp that is all one need pay to enter the Kingdom of Suppose.

Suppose I had all the money in the world—which would I choose...?

Suppose I were a child again, which should I love best...?

Suppose I admire this hard enough, for some pursed grown-up to notice

Here was magic, readily, willingly, come back to earth, just for a week or two. Here, where the rocking-horses couldn't keep quite still, the great and little bears conceal their plush delights, the glorious balls, made out of attainable rainbows, bounced softly among sedater wares.

Stop and play. Everything invites you. Forget the dark and the cold of a grown-up world outside. The world made for its Edwards to tell the time of ... forget all that here, where no clock rules, and the present hour is for ever.

“Oh!” shivered Flute, entranced, “Oooo ...”

28

She bumped against a large and pleasant bear, who only swayed in reply and too little for anyone to notice.

Flute watched another bear, slightly less indulgent, beat time that didn't matter, with a stick.

A model railway, ran into ecstasy, round and round.

Two orange balls, come from nowhere, bumped very gently against her, and subsided into a grocer's shop, where they looked quite at ease, and did not appear to surprise the shop-keeper, a near relative of Mrs. Noah, of Ark, at all.

The air was full of bliss. It echoed “See's,” “Look's,” and “Lovely's” on every side. Babies sat on the ground opening dolls'-house doors.

Grown-ups gazed and gazed at balls and trains and bears. They never stopped until pulled away.

The whole world seemed to be newly painted. Hung over with tinsel surprise.

No ordinary law prevailed.

The less triumphed carelessly over the greater. Dolls, bears, tops, balls exchanged sizes, quite casually. And important grown-up arrangements suffered a see-this-change, and gave way to a tiny mechanical tumbler.

Flute caught sight of her own face, reflected,

with a bear's back, in a lost mirror. At least she supposed it was her own face, because of the hat and coat collar. Although there was nothing familiar about the great, tinsel-bright eyes, and the Christmas rose cheeks beneath them.

"What can I show you, Miss...?"

Flute pulled herself together, or, rather, tugged, as unchildishly as she could, at a matter of fact.

"The dolls—please—the Doll Show ..."

"This way ... Madame, for the Dolls—this way ..." It was an introduction, set to the tunes of musical box after musical box. Flute followed the invitation, shyly, past the rocker-boats, all a-sway for sheer pleasure.... She came to the Dolls....

"Do you care to see the Dolls?" asked a voice beside her....

A wonderfully sedate question, if useless, here, where the Care of Dolls seemed to take up the whole of the world.

The Dolls were arranged in three, wide golden caverns. One cavern was full of Dolls in blue; one, orange; one, deep rose ...

In each cavern sat and stood a host of little creatures, looking too wise to know the ways of the world. Too simple, not to suspect the world's absurdity.

They sat and stood about obligingly.

They gave the impression of having only just materialized out of an air, heavy with wishes.

They hardly looked real.

They looked far more real than the pallid, wistful people staring at them.

There they were, tiny, compact, brilliant, all exactly placed and priced.

Before them, above and under a swaying cord, pale humans eddied and changed ... their expressions, intentions, desires, feelings and appearances.

The Dolls had the best of it.

* * * * *

A very small saleswoman stood on the Dolls' side of the swaying cord, holding one of the Dolls, a Clown, in her arms.

She laughed over the Clown's head at Flute. A very small saleswoman, herself something between a person and a Doll, leaning over that Clown, to

the Doll's side....

Then she looked over Flute's head and nodded airily. To another of the many old gentlemen, come here to see the toys, supposed Flute, and moved aside.

The crowd at the cord moved, too, and filled Flute's place directly. Flute stepped back, and sheltered under the lace of an elaborate bassinette...

31

"I'll just wait here a moment," thought Flute, comforting herself, for the empty exchange of human backs for Dolls' faces.

A hidden musical box trickled its tiny silver tune, somewhere quite near.

Flute looked along the narrow alley between a bewilderment of bassinettes, and saw a man coming down it towards her.

The reason for Flute staring at this man, and going on staring, was his walk.

It was easy, graceful, un-self-conscious. Rather a grave, measured walk, for a young man's, and a young man's it was. A tall young man's, very tall indeed in that Lilliput world.

But, somehow, not a walk you expected. A walk out of place.

Then Flute realized why.

It was a country walk. A man's, used to wide space, and yet, to careful treading among little things.

The walk of someone accustomed to stop easily and consider small affairs.

This young man was used to a garden. Plenty of air, and little, pushing flowers. Great rushing winds, and the least of tiny roots. He was out of place here.... Was he?

Now he was stopping, looking very carefully under a bassinette coverlet. He seemed to be

32

considering it as seriously as a matter of some importance.

He looked up, afterwards, and his eyes met Flute's.

The brightest of smiles ran over his face. Visited a mouth that pointed its corners to meet it. Invaded, even, pointed ears, hair that grew in points at the temples. Returned to the gayest dark eyes, and seemed unwilling to go.

The young man held his hat in his hand. Now he seemed trying not to look at Flute, although it was easily seen that he considered himself in her

presence.

He stooped over another bassinette and appeared to lose his interest under the coverlet. Suddenly, Flute felt that this was a pity....

She looked at the young man's straight bowed back. She tried to think the right sort of things about his clothes.

A worn overcoat? A very un-new hat? That collar and tie looked even less new. Then how did this young man manage, himself, to look a very little like some lesser god? A creature finding the world lying there for his inspection?

He seemed so interested. Really absorbed, first in that bassinette, then in a bear on lonely guard beside it.

33

That pointed smile of his came and went, kindly. He was stooping over the bear, when, with a tiny scratching sound, a little tumbler came through his hoop, round the corner.

Both Flute and the young man stared at it. The tumbler went on tumbling, until, at last, with a woebegone squeak, he left off in the middle of the hoop.

Looking up to laugh, Flute found the young man just beside her. And, that they had made friends.

"Wouldn't you like all these toys?" asked Flute.

The young man gave the tumbler an attentive finger-tip.

"Yes, I would indeed, Miss," he said.

"Which one most?" persisted Flute.

"A Doll—a friendly one, Miss."

"You couldn't play with a Doll ..."

The young man considered this. Smiled. "Sometimes things get turned about. Haven't you noticed? You go out to play with a friend. The friend plays with you. The Doll might play with me. I sort of believe in Dolls. Being like live things. That's why I'd like to make sure of a friendly one, you see, Miss."

Flute put up one hand and moved her question-mark of hair, away from her coat collar,

34

back against her cheek. She had never felt so surprised. A young man. A stranger. With thoughts exactly fitting into her own. Words, unalarmed, to

match them.

A friend? Here? And now?

Flute's green eyes made gold of this strange young man as she stared at him....

"I'm so glad," said Flute, solemnly, "that I met you."

The young man bowed gravely.

"Miss," he said, "now I've met you, I'll not be inquiring for a friendly Doll.... I do admire Dolls. You see, I've never been closer to them really, than the bottom of a Christmas-tree, when they're at the top.... A Doll is something like a Queen to me.... So perhaps," said the young man, pointing his smile like an arrow, "perhaps it's just cheek for me to expect a friendly one."

Flute looked at him seriously.

Was he making some sort of joke?

Flute mistrusted jokes, remembering Edward's and their ever-concealed points.

But if this stranger was making a joke, he looked as though he thought it really Flute's own ... and he were only admiring it, as hers.

If he were giving Flute his joke, in this generous manner, the least she could do was to give

35

him, in return, her most precious thing. Her confidence.

Very bright and pink, Flute came quite close to this young man to whisper.

"Do you know...? I'd rather have a Doll than anything in the world?"

There. The secret was out. Luckily no one had heard it, except the strange young man and the lonely bear on guard beside the bassinets. Flute's secret. The silly little thing she could never have owned to anyone in all her life, if the Terrible Thing had not suddenly made her free of her childhood again.

There was a singing in Flute's ears. Quite a song of triumph, now Flute had dared say one single thing she really felt. However silly that thing, Flute had really felt it, then said it.

Flute clasped her hands together. Pressed her knees back. In time to give a jump as a little voice said at her shoulder, "And what sort of Doll, Miss?"

The very small saleswoman had left the Dolls to look after themselves, and come round the corner after the tumbler. She was standing between

Flute and the strange young man, still holding the Clown in her arms. Now she presented him. The Clown bowed to Flute. To Flute's companion.

"A nice Doll," said the small saleswoman.

36

She spoke in the tinkling manner of a musical box, and seemed trying to find words that might pierce dull human ears with pleasure.

But Flute felt guilty.

Once more the grown world had her in check. A—married person—a widow, really and truly, should be able to make a proper countersign—in other words, if wares were offered, buy them.

No use looking up wistfully, when one ought to be looking down, consideringly. Flute opened her bag, and looked into that.

There seemed to be very little of consideration in it. A piece of india-rubber came to finger again and again. Flute felt not a little like the Messenger in *Alice* searching in his bag for a ham sandwich and only finding hay.

At last, however, she discovered a pound note, very coy in one corner. When Flute looked up again she found the small sales-woman and the strange young man both smiling at her. The Clown bowing nearly into her arms.

The saleswoman straightened him, thoughtfully.

"A nice Doll. A very good Clown. Cob, the Clown, he is. You see he'll bend any way you prefer. Yes, a bell on his cap. People like a bell about a Clown, we always find. No

37

—no trousers. Those pink and white lozenge legs are newer this year, you know. Yes. The little skirt, just in case people object. It's really only a frill. Comes on and off quite easily. Put on another one if you don't altogether fancy the colour. Yes. Inexpensive, quite. Thirty shillings. Will you hold him while I just inquire...?"

Flute might have refused the Clown had he not been left, like that, in her arms. But there he was, sitting easily on the crook of her elbow, burying the bell, at the point of his cap, inside the question-mark of her own chestnut hair point.

Then he straightened himself, apparently quite unaided, and bowed from Flute's cheeks in the direction of the strange young man's chest.

* * * * *

“Well, why not?” said Cob the Clown.

* * * * *

“Thirty shillings—that’s right.” The small saleswoman was back again.

Flute and the strange young man looked at each other. A question hung between them on the point of his smile. But it was not “Shall, you do it? It was “How shall you do it?”

With the question hung perfect understanding.

38

On the smile-point, there was plenty of room for that....

The young man looked as one feeling in a pocket. He produced a shabby case. First some hay, then rather a grey ten-shilling note, of solitary, and treasured appearance.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

With a start and a flush, Flute remembered it wasn’t.

“Oh! But—thank you very much.... I mean really, ever so.... It is good of you, but of course, I couldn’t—could I? How—could—I—and—thank—you—all—the—same?”

“Miss,” said the young man, looking hard and brightly at Cob, who bowed benevolently. “’Tis a pleasure.” Cob bowed lower. “Such a great pleasure for me. A present you’re giving me. Making me feel a little nearer the top of the tree, with the Doll, that’s like a Queen, really. Now you’ve given a pleasure, you’ll never take it away again? Miss?”

Seriously the young man gave the grey note to the small saleswoman.

“Miss ...” he said.

“That’s right—Miss,” said the saleswoman. Both looked at Flute, as though fitting her with a subtle and flattering form of address.

39

“It’s very kind ...” murmured Flute. Cob collapsed over her shoulder.

* * * * *

“There, that’s settled it,” said Cob the Clown.

* * * * *

They went away together, through fairyland where the air grew warmer and warmer with “See’s,” and “Look’s,” and “Lovely’s.”

Flute with Cob hugged in a parcel. She wouldn't allow the young man to carry him. But she accepted an arm to press, even to pinch, under deep breaths, and shallow little sighs of delight.

They stopped at the Dolls. They stopped at the bears, the trains, the rocker-boats, the visible musical boxes. In time not to tread on babies, opening dolls'-house doors.

They stopped for everything worth while.

And, only when she saw, beyond a glass door, umbrellas, shining grey, like the sad ghosts of balls and balloons left in a happier world, did Flute remember that all this was a dream, never to be revealed to Mum or Dad.... Outside it was raining. All the rain slanting one way, and that in the faces of people waiting for the buses.

"I must go," sighed Flute, because part of her had gone already.

40

...She didn't ask him anything at all.... She didn't know his name, or one single thing about him. Only that a star must have danced that their meeting might be born....

And what good is that to satisfy social inquiry...?

For one happy lost hour Flute had held childhood tight again.

And, during that hour, something old and experienced woke, somewhere under Flute's arm ...

Treasure what you have ... keep it hidden ... never speak of it ... or expect it again....

"Why do I know that I had better not ask him anything at all?" thought Flute.

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"Well! They say every fool has a grain of sense, in his shoe," said Cob the Clown.

* * * * *

Flute saw him, quite distinctly, standing above the umbrellas, waving his hat.

She noticed those gay triangles on each side of his forehead, where his hair grew in points.

Before her bus rolled away.

41

Chapter Two

FLUTE, at nineteen, had promised to marry Edward Whayman. Flute was the only child of parents, who, having waited seven sentimental years for her arrival, had just decided to deny themselves the delights of a family, after all, when Flute announced her advent.

Flute's surprised progenitors were upset.

In more ways than one.

They were entirely devoted to each other, and remarkably popular in consequence of the amiable self-content that relishes an audience. Their active social life grew year by year.

Not so their income.

And now, here, or hereish, was Flute ...

Now, it is one thing to sigh for the dear little baby, favouring its Papa and Mamma, in equal, dimpled parts. Quite another thing to undertake a Nursery, a schoolroom, school fees, servants, repelled at the idea of a Nursery or Schoolroom, the expense of modern upbringing, the distress and disturbance of modern ideas and eternal youth.

Dismayed, Flute's parents looked at each other over the upturned toes of the remains of Sentiment.

42

And decided, tacitly, to let all this make as little Difference to them as possible.

The Little Difference, as possible, arrived.

Flute, thus encouraged—thus called, because of an unexpected arrival, the morning after a friend's concert....

Flute came into a world with which she never seemed quite in tune.

A little slip of a thing was Flute. With a smooth, shining chestnut head, in a whole family of dark brown ones.

Flute, with a white skin where every other skin was apple-rosy.

Flute, with tiny bones in a queer little body, slender and sweet enough, yet somehow strange to look and touch.

No one in the family had ever really taken to Flute.

Granny, always forgetting children's funny feelings, spoke constantly of her distrust of red hair, but Granny liked to have Flute "about."

A convenient family legend grew up that Granny and Flute were perfectly happy together. So together, Flute's parents encouraged them to be. Flute spent much of her childhood in the country with Granny, made free of Granny's tongue, and the wide engagement of Granny's tree-blessed garden.

43

So little notice was taken of Flute, her short hair and skirts aiding, that it was a horrid shock to stumble across her nineteenth birthday, and suddenly, "What about Flute?" for a family refrain.

Answer came there, one.

Mr. Edward Whayman's.

Mr. Edward Whayman was a close friend of Flute's parents. So close indeed that, very often, he was only separated from them by the corner of a card-table, or the length of his golf handicap.

A wistful pinkness had begun to show on the top of his head where, once, thick hair had been. And, suddenly, without warning, a wistful expression came over his well-hung countenance whenever Flute drifted into the room.

Mr. Whayman spoke to Dad. To Mum. He spoke earnestly, of earnest things. Incomes, settlements, provision, to be well and truly made.

Surprise and pleasure warred in Dad's and Mum's breasts. Pleasure won. The idea of Edward Whayman and Flute! Really, the splendid idea!

Of course, Edward was older than a young fellow of Flute's own age. But where was the young fellow who could offer Flute what Edward Whayman was offering?

44

And, as Flute had always been such an odd, unusual sort of girl, what better than for her to make an unusually good marriage?

Flute had always seemed so fancifully inclined. So inattentive to the wisdom of the world around her. And if Flute had ever expressed a desire for ordinary, girlish amusements, like her Cousins Bess and Barbara enjoyed, someone had always been at hand to prove that she didn't want them, really.

Her family had never wearied in explaining to Flute how little she wanted. Proving, without effort, how little she was wanted. What a child

she persisted in remaining. What a pity that was, although it much relieved her elders from dancing attendance on her growing concerns.

Flute never seemed to grow up farther than a tuck could be let down....

And just when Flute's real age might have made this just a little awkward, behold Providence, with Mr. Edward Whayman.

There was another thing. Flute's parents were none too well-off. They had not really felt called upon to make much difference in their socially active lives when Flute appeared, and, in considering the future, Flute must try to remember this. Flute must remember that unless Granny and various Aunts and

45

Uncles remembered her later, she would never be a rich woman. But here Edward Whayman came in so well. Right in as a splendid thing. And so now dear little Flute must realize this, set all her fancies aside, and settle down to Edward....

Flute's family, at any rate, certain outlying Auntly and Uncular portions of it, found a slight difficulty in tuning into the idea of little Flute and that quite old Edward Whayman.

But their feelings were nothing to Flute's. That is, if she had any feelings at all—anything left but utter and blank bewilderment.

Dad and Mum were right. Flute had been a baby up to this very moment.

Flute had lived in a world of her own, pitched somewhere near the stars, seen out of her nursery window. Why, the nursery had become a spare-room, only last year when Nurse had retired to attend a sick sister in the country.

Flute's education had been confined to classes at a large Kensington day school, where she had never really made friends.

Flute had, in fact, made friends with no one except Nurse, her fairy-story books and her own fancies. A pretty enough arrangement, while Flute, a child, need only hang the tree of Life with tinsel and toys. But when that

46

tree was ready to be planted out in the world....!

Nurse, leaving Flute, last year, had begged her, between sobs, to try and keep the Nursery just as it always had been. And, Nurse departed, no one had suggested anything else.... Until Edward Whayman came along with the most staggering suggestion possible.

Edward was kind. Edward was sensible. He spoke very kindly to Flute, and explained how little he expected of her.

Flute, come downstairs from the nursery stars, sat, listening to Edward, in the dusk-filled drawing-room, just before dinner. Always, it seemed, the drawing-room widened between them, its carpet, developing magic properties, stretched and stretched....

At any rate the hearth-rug was not magic, but Edward's. He stood on it, flecking away Flute's fancies with his coat-tails, before the ghost of an enlightening blaze.

But Edward was most kind.

He talked a great deal, and always of settled matters. His feelings. Flute's. His wedding settlements on her. "A relief to your parents. A weight off their minds."

Flute caught at this repeated remark, of Edward's, to wonder, whether, really, she had ever been as heavy as all that....

47

Edward was so sensible. What more could anyone ask?

If Flute felt utterly bewildered and blank, certainly it was all her own fault. What did she want? What did she expect? Now if only Flute could answer either of those questions, a reason might be found, and some alternative offered to Edward.

As it was, what on earth could anyone suggest? And, here was Edward, being as patient as possible....

Had Flute any idea as to what she wanted to do? Did she wish to take up games seriously, devote her life to some Cause, train for any Career...? And, if so, how did she propose to set about it? ... Very well, then, she had better have Edward.

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So Flute did.

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It was all most bewildering.

Three months ago, Flute had seemed merely a toy no one troubled to remove from the old Nursery. Now, Mum, Dad, Granny, everyone, could none of them look at her without feverishly trying to dispose of her afresh.

Finally, they took hold of the situation, and disposed of Flute, in silver letters, "to Mr. Edward Whayman."

The wedding invitations went out. The wedding day came in....

Looking back over it all, Flute could see nothing but a blank, glittering expanse of white satin.

Everything else was eclipsed by its glare.

Turn wherever she would, each side of Flute a weary jailer knelt, pressing her gently into some desired pattern with a mouth full of pins.

"Flute had better have this—that.... You see, Madame Fittout, I am allowing her quite her own choice in everything."

So Flute held up a pattern, and Mum decided on it. Aunts and Cousins, coming to lunch occasionally, looked slightly amused and said they thought it would all do very nicely for Flute. Splendidly. And Flute thought nothing ... there was so much to think about that she had never heard of before.

The night before the wedding, Flute, alone with Edward, in the drawing-room, for one minute before Mum appeared again, heard him say, out of a reddening face, that he hoped Flute quite understood—how he felt....

Mum came in before Flute could ask him whether he thought she understood anything at all....

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Of her wedding day Flute remembered nothing but glare ... A glare of whiteness. A glare of blackness....

That white satin—nothing could ease its glitter, not even a plain, childish net veil soften it.

Mum and Granny had both been married in legal white satin.

What better for Flute?

The satin was some treasured by Granny. Rigid and chill, yellowing a little in the folds.

"Wonderful how it has lasted," said Mum and Granny together.

Flute, encased in it, wondered what could possibly hope to destroy it?

The winter sun came in to sport with the primrose shading of its folds....

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The glare went on. Even driving alone, with a diffident Dad, to the church, Flute felt conscious of a glaring road, slipping away like a river, under a swift, hired motor-car.

“Too fast, these fellers drive,” said Dad. And that was all.
The glare of eyes on the pavement for her dismounting.
The glitter of eyes watching her up the aisle.
The great gleaming lilies staring her out of countenance all the service through.

50

The shiny top of Edward’s embarrassed head.
The best broadcloth voice in which he assured the clergyman of his excellent intentions towards Flute.
Then the crash of the wedding march. Like violent glare transposed into music.
More eyes, Granny’s, sharp and glinting with tears.... People still staring, outside. How their eyes glared and glared!
Her bouquet shaking as though it were feeling all sorts of queer things, undreamed by its mistress....
Edward, sitting beside her....
All those glaring eyes streaming away....
And then the queer, unbelievable, Terrible Thing....
They explained to Flute afterwards exactly what it was, exactly how it happened. How the bridal car, leaving the church door, swept out and round, very fast, against the stream of traffic.
No one was to blame, and nothing need have happened if only the traffic had not included a long trolley, piled, high and far beyond its length, with ladders.
The bridal chauffeur just allowing for the trolley had just not allowed for the ladders....
Of it all, Flute could only remember two things.

51

The first, Edward, just before their car left the church gates, looking for some safe place to deposit his top-hat.
The second, as their car swung round, Edward bowing deeply forward....
A terrible noise was going on then. A screaming, tearing sound. Behind them, a ripping ... as though the whole world were being rent from top to bottom ... while Edward, bowed, deeply forward, over the hat he still held.

Flute remembered nothing else. Except that the sound of ripping turned a bright black, just the colour of Edward's top-hat.

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They explained it all to Flute afterwards. How they explained it all to Flute afterwards. The trolley. The ladders. Running right into the back of the bridal car. Injuring Edward so terribly. How Edward died, three hours afterwards, in a hospital. Just when he should have been leaving King's Cross, with a very little confetti on his shoulders, and Flute at his side.

Flute, mercifully unconscious after a blow from one side of a ladder.

Flute, who woke next morning, back in her own bedroom, so strangely, just the same.

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52

Flute lay in bed for three days staring at her bedroom ceiling.

Then she got up, feeling as though she had received a severe shaking the last thing last night.

The house looked quite different when she went downstairs into it.

All sign of a wedding put away.

No suggestion of Edward anywhere.

Only an odd emptiness, and an occasional curious glance, surprised under a housemaid's cap.

Mum and Dad, very silent. The violent sort of silence that suggests conversation only just left off.

Over tea-cosies, and teacup rims, Mum and Dad looked and looked at Flute.

What an impossible position! What a distressing affair! Poor little Flute! Of course. Of course. She must, poor child, be grieving terribly....

Mum and Dad (especially Mum) tried a variety of suitable sentiments on Flute.

The feelings of a woman. A wife. A fiancée, bereaved. A bride, with her most precious jewel snatched from her bosom.... A widow, resigned....

None of these seemed to fit Flute at all. And constant emotional tryings-on became very

53

exhausting. Dad and Mum felt tired out with it all....

As for Flute herself, she continued to feel as though that severe shaking had certainly taken place, but not last night—no, longer ago, now, than that....

The shaking had, somehow, emptied her heart. If it's really your heart you feel with....

Flute's felt as empty as a child's money-box on Christmas Eve. Nothing at all left in it.

Gently, Flute held her heart to her ear, as it were, and shook it. Not even a dry leaf fluttered inside it.... Wasn't Flute shocked? Sad? Nothing suitable? ... Not even plain sorry? Flute shook her heart afresh ... no answer rattled inside it....

Dad and Mum, however, obliged, with the most gratifying suitability of sentiments. Although, at times, they sounded just a little shaken, too.... Edward, it appeared, had made provision, so well and so truly that he had guarded against even such a contingency as had taken place.

In event of his own sudden death, and resulting infant widow, Edward had provided that Flute should enjoy no unguarded penny of his until her twenty-fifth year, and no

54

farthing of any sort should she decide to marry again.

Two hundred and fifty pounds a year might be devoted to Flute's expenses, under her parents' ministration, until her twenty-fifth birthday.... After that legal knots should be gingerly untied, with as many complications as possible ... unless Flute married again....

"And really, Flute, I think we must own that we quite understand dear Edward's feelings. After all, no man really likes to feel that the money he took all the trouble to earn is going to keep another man, who, perhaps, has never taken the trouble to earn anything. Dear Edward! So devoted. Even beyond the tomb, as one might say ..."

Mum might say so to Flute, ignorantly young, and in need of proper sentiments put before her, now so much had been snatched away.

What Mum said to Dad may, possibly, have been coloured in accordance with more adult lights.

Anyway, Mum and Dad were arranging it all. All the proper feelings, the right way to think, to take all this queer matter, of so much Edward, and then, suddenly, so little. Mum and Dad were presenting Flute's situation to the world, in the way the world would credit most kindly.

Flute, under Mum's and Dad's ministrations, was almost growing into her weeds.

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It was queer. It was very queer. How Flute felt. How she didn't feel. This emptiness, so strangely light and sky-coloured.... For Flute didn't feel at all unhappy.

Only just as though Life, which had threatened to be so solid, was proved, after all, nothing but dark shadow, ready, at some breezy puff of Fate's to detach itself, float off, as misty smoke against the blue indifferent sky.

Chapter Three

FLUTE could not help feeling that the whole of Kensington was very glad to see the last of her. Its streets and squares going past her at such a rate that their houses looked like ribbons measuring farewell by the yard.

Flute sat in a swift taxicab, on her way to take a Paddington train in good time to spend Christmas with Granny.

Flute had just said Good-bye to Mum and Dad, both rather absorbed over things that didn't concern her.

Mum and Dad had both been suffering from a very trying time lately, and were going off themselves, on a business trip, with friends. It had all been decided in rather a hurry, and in the hurry Flute found herself labelled To Be Left Till Called For With Granny. This was as customary as it was convenient. For Granny and Flute always spent Christmas together. And surely the Terrible Thing need not upset every single arrangement?

Granny, so sensible, with such splendidly sturdy ideas. Flute, so much in need of that sort of thing ... a certain medicinal shaking-up, after all this sad, odd settlement of her affairs....

Anyway, darling, we cannot think of anything else just now.

Later, perhaps, later ... only a very little later Flute, putting a farewell head out of her taxicab window, saw Mum's head already turned back to her own arrangements from Good-bye.

Flute and the taxi turned a corner. The taxi, tired of being a taxi, tried being a Jack-in-the-box, with Flute as principal boy.

Flute was popped about the taxi in every direction, as that merry vehicle danced over the road.

"Oh! dear," murmured Flute, rescuing herself from the floor. "If only I knew what to

57

expect. This mat is so prickly, and the seat is so terribly smooth, and it's quite uncomfortable not to know which is coming next."

Indeed, all around Flute familiar things seemed to be changing and interchanging their patterns, considerably.

Passing houses, springing up and down, as suddenly as telegraph posts seen from a train.

The railings of square gardens, going by as dizzily as wheel-spokes.

Through a hole in the taxi floor, Flute could see the grey, plain road, racing along, ardent as a mountain river. Only the winter sun, placidly perennial as a Christmas card, shone at her, over roofs, over chimney-pots, over all the puzzled world below.

It even managed to strike a smile out of Paddington Station. The glass roof glittered like a frosted cake, for no reason but the sun's.

Paddington platforms were all bewildered. People running about the wrong ones, quite distractedly. But there was a general feeling of holly in the air. Rosy faces abounded, smiles pricked through everywhere. Crates and boxes bulged about, looking as welcome as excrescences in Christmas-stockings.

Flute's guard wore a sprig of mistletoe in his cap over a genial eye. Even the colour of his flag seemed seasonable.

58

With no trouble at all, Flute's train slipped out of Paddington, easily as a good wish.

Flute settled down, in a corner for the journey.

Two small children, opposite, watched her do it. They watched so steadily and so unblinkingly, that Flute wondered whether, possibly, they guessed at Cob, not left behind, but tucked up in the suit-case above her head. However, they made no sign of suspicion beyond painting their chins and cheeks with chocolate, and dropping, suddenly, asleep.

The train ran on through folded winter land. Out in the country, the sun grew pale. The clouds must have stolen his warmth, and for no particular reason, as it seemed to make no difference to their chill, thick grey.

The country lay bewitched. Slight fogs hung over fields, and some phantom, mist-crop flourished on grass and road alike. The sky had all the world's wonder in keeping.

Clouds came up, carved themselves into monuments, changed back into cloud majestically.

Although the sun was pale, the far sky was warm, as a veil before a fire. Some glowing secret behind the horizon.... Then the clouds came over again.

Flute watched the trees race past.

The heat of her carriage drew an anxious

59

veil of steam over the window to hide them from her, but Flute rubbed vigorously with the window strap, and watched again.

The trees, thought Flute, seemed quite as alien to the countryside as visiting witches writhing under a spell that transformed them into their own broom-sticks.

“I’ve never noticed trees so unhappy before,” reflected Flute. Perhaps it was the rate this Christmas train was going. But the poor things looked so prisoned, so tortured, twisting their branches through the mists, imploring the careless sky.

It seemed impossible to consider them as they would be in summer. Contented, wide, and tolerant with leaves. Just pleasant shade over cattle, another note in the great green symphony of the countryside.

No, these poor impotent creatures were very different.... Perhaps even trees know rebellion, refusal, and wait the winter to urge some grief against Nature? ...

Flute’s head, bumping against the window-frame, woke her up....

Flute began to puzzle about the queerness of the world in general. She almost wished the witch-behaviour of the trees would stop the train so that she might get out and ask them a few things.

60

One, especially, which could never be answered except by someone or something as unusual as a distressed tree.

How could the same world produce two such different creatures as Edward and the strange young man at the Toy Fair? And, having produced them, describe them both as men?

There was something wrong about it.

If Edward was a man, then certainly the Toy-stranger was not....

Anyway ... no, he wasn’t....

Nothing that Flute had ever seen, playing Bridge, anticipating tennis, or re-playing golf, had ever remotely resembled the stranger with the arrow for a smile, the grave attention for charm. The willing absorption in child’s things that didn’t matter.

Flute, considering him, felt as happy as a boy whistling a tune he never knew he knew....

A merry self-content was hers.

Why, she felt almost as though she had made up that Toy-stranger.... And yet, she mused happily on his not-new hat, and elderly tie, pleasant

signals that, of course, he was real. Had Flute been concerned with his equipping at least, he should have had all new clothes....

61

So he wasn't a dream. He wasn't just another drift of fancy.

He was ... well, he wasn't anything at all like Edward, and if the world could call them both men, it had better turn its attention to the troubles of the trees, and just let mankind alone.

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"Alone. Yes, alone. Well alone. But then the world says, 'Nothing of mine can be well, alone.' There you have the case in a nutshell, and here you have me in a suit-case," sang Cob the Clown....

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Flute's train ran into Withy, Flute's station, as easily as a toy train.

The platform of Withy looked just like a packing-case, at the bottom of which something lay hidden that somebody was determined to find. Crates and boxes were making hay of the air. Red-faced porters hopped about them like robins. Flute, tugging at her suit-case, fell over the chocolate festoons of the children, who, after sitting quietly opposite her all through the journey, suddenly decided to get in her way.

Flute poked her head out of the window, and just saved the rest of her person from following it, as the door swung free.

62

Yes. There was Granny walking off in the opposite direction to Flute's. Granny always made up her mind where things were going to be; and was never very pleased at finding them elsewhere.

Flute hoped Granny wasn't going to be annoyed at her own unexpected head out of the wrong coach.

But luckily Granny was too busy scolding the porter for letting the train into the station five minutes later than should be.

"Well, Flute," said Granny, finishing with the porter, and giving Flute a kiss with a spot of her veil. "Well, my dear child ... Flute! Flute! Be careful of that great trunk. Bless me! Is that you again, Jim? The tiresome boy, no more good as a porter than he was in my stables, and never will be.... Come along now, Flute, my poor horses have been kept waiting quite long enough as it is.... Come along."

Granny tossed her head indignantly at the train which had kept her horses waiting so unsuitably, and led the way out of the station, only pausing just long enough to tell the young fellow who asked for her platform ticket, what she thought of his Company's impertinence.

"A penny, indeed, a penny to come here on to the platform of my native town. I

63

never heard the like of it. And this I will say, I came on to this platform long before your mother thought of your father, Tom Ellis, and more's the pity she ever did, as so often I've told her. Before that, indeed—I took the coach to Salisbury, on my wedding tour, long before these nasty railways were allowed past people's houses. You bear that in mind, now, Tom Ellis, and don't you ever let me hear you ask me for a penny again. The idea of such a thing. I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself. A penny to come on to my own platform! The very thought.... I'll give you a penny for my thoughts, Tom Ellis, the very next time you dare say a word about it. And then you'll be glad to give half a crown to get out of my way, I daresay."

Granny walked out of the station still scolding, in spite of propitiatory caps being touched on all sides.

Granny went her own way with such a vigour of determination that she swayed from side to side, sometimes leaving her way completely, with the effort.

Just now, Granny went through the station's swing-door entrance. Cried, "Careful! Now, careful!" to a blameless small child, only in her path because she had left it entirely.

Exclaimed, "Home now, Daniel!" like a

64

battle-cry, and mounted into her carriage, as a queen might mount a throne with crooked steps.

Granny's carriage took up nearly the whole of the station yard.

It was handsomely designed for more spacious days than these, and demanded quite as much room as the station's motor-bus, all with the air of a flourishing, spreading family tree, sheltering plants of lesser growth.

It was the Closed Carriage. Flute wondered why. For there was also, and more pleasantly, the Open Carriage. And to-day had turned out delightfully after all, from its strict mould of chill cloud. On all sides the sun was

finding something to smile over. Tiny sparkles struck from the porter's cap-peaks, waiting drops on dull railings, dented tin trunks in stacks, even the stones of the road.

But Granny had come in the Closed Carriage all the same. It was a very noble, glossy affair, Daniel must hiss and hiss again to keep it in such splendid condition.

It shone all over with funereal splendour, and Daniel's top-hat attended it triumphantly.

Flute got in after Granny, sneezing convulsively as Granny, settling herself, whisked the hairs of the fur-rug all about them.

"Upon my word, Flute, how you do sneeze,

65

to be sure! Don't tell me you've come down to me with a nasty cold? You haven't? Oh! Well You ought to know, I suppose.

"Home! Daniel!"

Granny pulled up the window beside her so hard, that, as the carriage started at that moment, she nearly flattened her veiled nose against the glass.

"Pull up yours, too, Flute! Bless the child! Right up! Don't leave a draughty place at the top like that. And, well now, Flute, my dear. Here you are ... once more..."

Granny leant forward, and pressed a kindly cold nose-tip against Flute's cheek. Granny's kiss smelt of lavender, camphor, the big wardrobe and decision. Granny's kiss was rather hard, and had a stubborn tang. It was almost too admonishing to be kissed back. But you could feel the warmth beneath it, as you can feel the warmth of a bird, under ruffling feathers.

Granny finished kissing Flute directly, and started looking at her.

Granny frowned at Flute, in her usual way. The child was odd. Queer.

It couldn't be helped, of course, but there it was. Granny always hid her affection for Flute under a frown. That red hair. Dark chestnut? Nonsense. Nothing but plain carrots.

66

Those green eyes. Did anyone ever? And all the family with decent dark ones, or a sensible blue.

Oh! Well! No use complaining now—although what her dear Grandfather would have said to carrots served up to the family mahogany

like this ... and to eyelashes, that absurd length.... Why not borrow the garden brooms and have done with it?

And thin ... good gracious ... a grown woman, and the size of an underfed fourteen ...

A grown woman. And a widow.

Now Granny really looked at Flute.

She was prepared for it. She had been preparing a suitable attitude, a suitable outlook on Flute's situation ever since she heard of the Terrible Thing.

Granny had been a widow herself ever since Flute's mother's girlhood. Granny's widow-hood had been her triumph. A brave bereavement, nobly born.

Granny, flourishing in crêpe, had flourished in an age that made the most of its widows and called on all sections of society to do the same.

Granny, who had dearly loved the late Henry Lemander, had loved his memory just as well. She had decked it out with sighs

67

and portents. Framed it in black. Illuminated it with suitable sentiments.

Granny, a happy wife, a heroic widow.

The flower of Granny's love, a wreathed everlasting, in Granny's simple, helpful world, that stood aside, with admiring, sky-cast eyes.

Granny, bringing up six fatherless children, single-handed, the other hand occupied with a black-edged handkerchief, had been the admiration of the town of Withy.

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And now, here was Flute....

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"So near ... yet so far ..." sang Cob the Clown inside his suit-case, beneath Granny's feet.

* * * * *

All Granny's suitable sentiments had been at their best in considering Flute's engagement to Edward.

Edward, Granny had decided, was The Very Thing for Flute. So Granny had stifled any small bastard feeling relative to Flute's youth, and oddly unmarriageable look.

One got so into the way of calling a grandchild a child, and denying it the grandeur of growth.

Convenient, but, like all convenient things, of such smooth usage, that it was liable to slip out of one's grasp at last.

68

Suddenly one had to snatch at something that wasn't there....

Flute? Why, no child at all.

A great girl, quite fit to be married.

Certainly ... Edward ...

Granny had interviewed Edward.

Congratulated all concerned, defiantly and warmly.

What's that you say? Flute, rather too young? Edward, not quite young enough?

Nonsense! When I think of my own dear husband ... of Henry ... his age, more than mine ... how he was the one person to guide me ... bear with me, a great, awkward sort of girl, I daresay ... Granny said, suddenly, before her voice got too shaky. So Granny approved of Edward, looking away from Flute rather hard while she did it.

When Granny was visited by the shadow of the Terrible Thing, she brought up all her suitable sentiments like massed thunder-clouds. Granny even managed a pair of stony tears. She hid her face in her hands, before remembering to cast her eyes to the skies.

For three days Granny mourned Edward and Flute's consequent situation in capital letters.

Edward. So Needed. So Taken. Indeed So Snatched Away.

69

Flute. So Left. So Bereft. So entirely, so almost, embarrassingly Bereft.

Flute, a widow....

But, was she...?

A widow....

No one knew better than Granny exactly what a widow was. Should be. The delicate tight-rope on which a proper widow balanced her knowledge, of the chill of what she had lost, and the warmth of what she would never know again.... But to preserve this balance one must at least know something....

Now about Flute...?

What did Flute...?

What could Flute...?

A widow...?

It seemed to Granny that no one had thought of any of this before.

It occurred to Granny that, on the whole perhaps, possibly, this might be just as well....

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“Well, then, why not keep a little thing like that to yourself...?” sang Cob the Clown, to the soles of Granny’s boots.

* * * * *

Granny had brought the Closed Carriage to meet Flute. It seemed to her the more suitable vehicle.

Repressed by buttoned upholstery, inspired

70

by a strong smell peculiar to that upholstery, Granny filled the heavy, ominous air of the Closed Carriage with the right spirit of one widow to another.

Granny put a warm, wiry little arm round Flute, flinging a rigidly sequined mantle all about her in the process.

“Dear Flute, I should like to say my dear Harriet, that being so much more suitable than your name, too after my remarks to your Mother when I heard of her outlandish idea of calling a Christian—‘Flute’ ... ‘Well, Jenny,’ I said, distinctly,—‘Well, Jenny, Flute or no Flute, at least give the poor child her great-grandmamma’s name as well.’ And I’m glad to say your Mother listened to me that time, although never as often as I could wish.... Flute, indeed! ... Well, my dear, here you are, I’m glad to say, and under such sad circumstances. We must bear with them, Flute. We must, of course, bear all things. And I said to poor old Sarah Handly, only last Tuesday, when she came up to ask me for help with her husband ... ‘Sarah!’ I said, ‘The Devil has ever been a drunkard, so what can we expect of William Handly, who only wanted horns as my poor father was never tired of saying?’ I sent her away quite cheered up. A sensible woman, Sarah.

71

I wish there were more like her, nowadays, but, of course ... what was I saying? ... Ah! yes, Flute, my poor, poor dear child ...”

...Now Flute was looking as widowed as possible. Her small face getting whiter and whiter....

“Granny ... oh! Granny ...”

There! Poor little thing. A sad business all this, and how Flute was feeling it. The poor child. However childish she looked, Flute was certainly behaving most appropriately.

The Carriage gave a jolt, turning a corner....

“Dear child ... I quite understand your feelings.... Naturally ...”

“It’s ... oh! Granny ... only the Closed Carriage ... I’m awfully sorry, but it’s just the funny smell making me feel sick ... like it did when I was little....”

Chapter Four

THE town of Withy is built on two of the green hills of Somerset, by its presence turning both of them from green to grey. It is one of those happy, small Somersetshire towns, set in a land, green as a dear memory, under a modestly veiled sky.

The town of Withy has many endearing characteristics, such as roads too narrow to turn a cart in, and memorial fountains to worthy citizens, all well set up in the way of modern traffic.

It has certain visitable monuments, a confusion of Urban and Rural District Councils, plenty of the Poor that are always with us, and an undisturbed, brooding air.

In short, to visit the Town of Withy, you would say that here, at least, Time could not wreak much harm.

Should you climb its northerly grey hills and brave Granny's gates, drive, great trees, front door, a different complexion, decided as a hot blush, would be put upon your opinion.

The Town of Withy, according to Granny, was very nearly always, in a startling state. The press of modern life, the rush of Change, quite sufficient to frighten her horses.

The citizens of Withy, trying, palpitating people, always talking of widening roads, removing well-known landmarks. Installing heating-apparatuses or electric light, electing the wrong people to Councils, and keeping them there. Putting peculiar ideas into the heads of the Poor, and raking the countryside with modern conveniences of all sorts.

Granny could not make any of it out, and

73

that was not for want of discussing it. Loudly and constantly did Granny deplore modern ideas and modern behaviour. She took the worthiest tombstones of the best of the departed to witness her distress, and blocked most of the motor traffic for miles around when she drove out in her carriage.

The hills of Withy were steep and sharp, so that Granny's carriage was constantly reduced to a portly crawl. To-day this gave Granny plenty of time to distract Flute's sickly attention to more serious matters.

Granny was always very glad to distract anyone's attention to the affairs of her Town. Violated as it was by modern fiddle-faddery, Withy still remained the most respectable spot in the universe.

Everyone Granny had ever known much about had either been born here, or decently returned here to die.

Granny's Papa, her dearest Mamma, poor dear, dear Henry, Jane, of course, and herself ... they had all opened their eyes on that uncertain light due to turn, soon, to rain, a speciality of the Town of Withy.... And neither Granny nor Great-Aunt Jane had ever left it, except to travel very slightly, and hurry back again.

Granny, indeed, has passed all her life in Willow Hall. Henry and she having lived there

74

with Papa and Mamma until Papa's death, and taken possession of it afterwards.

Let other ideas be as they may be, Granny distinctly felt that a very wholesome virtue embellished this fact.

There was something decidedly suggestive of contentment-in-the-state-to-which-one-was-called about a person who had never known a move.

All these modern ideas ... well, well, Flute, pull up your side of the rug.... Although, of course, there was Jane ... Jane had moved, naturally enough. A little too naturally Granny sometimes thought, when she remembered Jane, after poor, dear Mamma's last breath, slipping off as it were, down the hill, to a house no one had really considered before.

A nice enough house, Granny admitted. Not so large, of course, as Willow Hall, standing under its elms on the hill-top, mastering the hill, the town below, and the willow-screened river all alike.

Still, Jane's house was rather handsome, and very much larger than you might expect. Indeed, its size was almost absurd ... but then dear Mamma's testamentary dispositions had been—well, a little odd.

For Mamma had arranged, or caused Papa

75

to arrange matters, so that Jane, always her favourite child, should be quite as wealthy as Bessie.

And certainly this was a curious arrangement, for Jane was unmarried, while Bessie was in the very thick of producing a family. Everybody knew

that Married Women were so much more important than spinsters.

And now, here was Jane, receiving just as deep bows from the local Bank Manager as Mrs. Lemander herself. Granny felt by no means certain that this was exactly as it should be.

Over the gentle, unassuming town of Withy, Granny ruled with vigour and with vim. At the top of her hill Granny sat at the head of her table, which grew longer and wider, as the years went by, and her family went away from it.

Granny, bustling about the warmth of her opinions, wearing the clothes, the views, the beliefs of other days.

Away, down at the side of the hill dwelt Jane. Gentle, cold, still.

Granny and Jane shared the mantle of the family, fallen upon them in equal parts.

They directed their households, distrusted each other's coachmen and gardeners, set out into the Town in the pursuit of Charity. Found

76

and admonished the shrinking creature, did a surprising deal for the Poor, and actively deplored the Drunkard.

All over the town of Withy, echoes could be heard of Granny's views, pieces of Granny's mind picked up everywhere.

But of Jane one caught nothing but the vanishing billow of a skirt. Heard nothing, but the constant phrase "Oh! Miss Hunting ... well, of course, she saw to that for us, like she always does...."

Between them, Mrs. Lemander and Miss Hunting wore the family mantle in equal parts, mistrusting each other slightly, under their veils. But even under a veil who shall say which part was the greater?

Flute ... don't let the rug keep slipping so on your side.

"And I'm bound to tell you this, Flute, because, of course, it's not a thing I could mention, or, indeed, should care to, except to no one in particular, but your Aunt Jane has been a bit difficult lately. As we all know, Jane will go her own way, and as for advice, I've never heard her ask it. Consequently she never seems to me to do quite rightly.

"And now I'm talking about that Simmons of hers in the garden. A nice enough man, I daresay, certainly his wife was an excellent

77

cook, but really the way your Aunt Jane sets out to favour him is quite past belief.

“Too big for his boots he’ll get, and then where will your Aunt Jane be?

“I’m sure I don’t know, as it was on the tip of my tongue to tell her, only the other day. For Jane is so set upon Simmons, you’d think there was no other gardener in the county.

“And if anything should happen to him, one thing’s certain, she shan’t have my Whimpey. Him I’ll never spare, for with his rheumatism, Jane’s garden, right down in the hollow like that, would be the worst place in the world, so damp as it is ... and if Jane doesn’t know that, it’s not for want of being told by me....

“And what do you think is the latest, Flute? Why, your Aunt Jane came to call one day, after hearing about Whimpey’s bad bout, and how his wife said that Jim, the boy, never can manage the garden alone.

“‘Good morning, Jane,’ I said, ‘So that’s what you’ve heard, is it?’ And I thought Jane did look a trifle ... however, all she said was—whatever do you think?—would I like to take on her Simmons’s son, Robin, for a few weeks, while Whimpey was away?

“Well, Flute, I simply stared, for, as you

78

know, that young Simmons is quite past everything. No gardener, if you please,—has been to a college—a college—not unlike your own Uncle’s, Flute,—and now wants to stay at home for a little, to study, and then has the chance of a place in—bless me—it may be America, if it isn’t Australia.... There’s a fine thing.... And your Aunt Jane quite perky about it all. As I said to her, ‘Jane,’ I said, ‘If the Lord meant that lad to be in America or Australia, He’d have put him there to begin with....’ But did your Aunt Jane listen? No. Just went on saying it was all such a splendid thing. Showed a superior spirit. And this young Simmons has just been to London. Out of your Aunt Jane’s pocket, I shouldn’t wonder.

“However, last week, there he was, standing in my hall. A tall, well-set-up young fellow, I’ll say that for him.... Would I care to try him for a few weeks...? He’d be glad to earn a little by day, to help his mother. And he’d study at night.

“He spoke quite nicely, I’ll say that for him, too. And really, what with Christmas coming on, and being so busy, here, there and everywhere, and

then one thing and another, especially my poor Whimpey not at all as I should wish, 'Well,' I said, at last, 'I suppose I see

79

no reason against it, just for a short time, mind.'

"So there he is, in my garden, now. But I hope it won't mean that your Aunt Jane thinks I approve of the way she goes on, because I don't."

The energy of her sentiments had betrayed Granny into quite a long speech.

Granny's bonnet nodded and nodded over her words. The two small ostrich feather tips that flourished there shaking in a palsy of appreciation over Granny's opinions and perceptions. And indeed, Granny was feeling quite pleased with herself.

She seemed to have swept away any very slight awkwardness connected with Flute.

Granny liked everything put as plainly as possible before her. And poor little Flute's present situation was quite as wispy as dissolving mist....

Granny felt a trifle uncomfortable about it, too.

She felt, somehow, as if the ingenuous Flute were making a mock of her. Was there not a slight indelicacy about a silly child like that claiming equal widowed position and rights with Granny herself? And if Flute really wanted to be a widow, why couldn't she, at least, try to look more like one?

80

Instead of looking exactly the same underfed fourteen as ever ... not a tear-mark, a sigh, or a crimp of crêpe about her....

So that it was really very comforting indeed, to find oneself ignoring the whole peculiar business and talking away to a Flute found to be as unimportant as ever. After all, there's no situation under the sun that cannot be improved by Taking No Notice....

The Closed Carriage gave a dignified bump, and drove in at the Willow Hall gates, the portly horses swishing the clustering shrubs aside.

"Ah! My poor laurels!" exclaimed Granny, who always spoke as though the fact of their requiring cutting back so badly, placed her favourite shrubs in a state of bereavement.

"Jump out, Flute," Granny added, but Flute and Granny were both so mixed up with the carriage rug that jumping proved as out of the question as a fly might find it from a spider's web.

“Well, Flute, here you are. Careful now!” said Granny, going in at the front door first, and catching her sequined mantle on the door-knob in her bustle.

Here Flute was. Standing, just the same as ever, in the wide hall of the old family home, with the gay, country light sliding up to her

81

feet from all sides, along the shining oak boards.

Welcome Flute was. She knew it by those shining boards. It was coming home again to set one’s eyes once more on objects known, unmoved, from babyhood....

The hall was just the same. Granny, though always bustling about it, altered nothing here. The great carved oak chairs, made out of shadows in their dark corner.

The huge brass Oriental jar, glowing, subdued as a trapped sun, just there in the middle of the hall where light and shade did battle together.

Granny turned to Flute, an odd look under her veil,—Granny, who dealt with all situations single-handed, suddenly needing assurance that something was dear, not only to her ...

“It’s all just the same, you see, Flute,” said Granny.

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Inside the suit-case, lying by the hall door.

“Just a few things never change,” observed Cob the Clown.

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Granny bustled all over the house in a great fervour. She opened all the doors she encountered, and spoke loudly to their attendant rooms. Flute followed Granny about like an obliging shadow, and helped as well as she

82

could, while Granny kept up the sort of bustle likely to give the impression that the house was full of people.

Granny had had a large family, and now she only had it by post she missed it.

Christmas is a time of reunion, but Granny’s family, absorbed by indifferent individual festivities, merely sent her expensive presents, and kept its holly at its own hearth.

Rather a lot of Granny's dauntlessness was needed to deal with this situation. She would have preferred her family all set about her, waiting on her salutary, seasonable admonishments. Granny would just have liked even a short visit, if only from Henry or Jenny....

As it was she must make do with Flute, conceal her satisfaction at having that spartanly cherished grandchild with her, and concentrate on the admonishment and improvement of the Poor.

So Granny covered her heart with holly, and went about her house and her affairs, prickly with impatient goodwill.

"And you are sure, now, that you are quite comfortable, Flute? Here in the room you've always been accustomed to?" Granny suddenly coughed over the nipping recollection of how very nearly Flute had attained the double-bedded spare-room, just underneath....

83

Poor—poor Edward....

"Your room, as I always call it—quite your room," Granny went on, rather fast. "And now the winter curtains are up, after all the bother I had to make Annie alter the old library ones to make them do for in here. And the new overmantel-cover that your poor Aunt Jane worked and would do daffodils, although, as I told her, with roses on the wall-paper I should have chosen something plainer. However, it's seldom any use speaking, I find. And anyway it's better than the old one with the moth. Why the moth, I never could make out. And, dear me, I was sorry to find it, for I thought the world of that mantel-cover, as your Great-cousin Frances, who made it, died twenty years ago come next Tuesday.... And then, of course ... Flute, why, Flute! What's this?"

Granny had been plunging about the room, inspecting every corner for Flute's comfort. Now, after straightening the new mantel-cover, Granny raised her eyes to meet Cob the Clown's, who was sitting easily over one of Aunt Jane's despised daffodils.

Cob the Clown bowed to Granny as she straightened the mantle-cover.

"Bless us all, now!" cried Granny. "Whatever can have possessed you to bring such a

84

thing as that down here? A toy? And the silliest sort of a toy that I've ever laid eyes on.... Well, Flute, upon my word, in your situation, I should have

thought better of you than that, my dear ...”

“It’s only Cob, Granny ...”

“Cob?” said Granny upon a snort. “Why—what do you mean ... Cob?”

“Cob the Clown—my Clown.... If you don’t like the little frill I can change it, or make trousers ...”

“Frills and trousers! Flute! I’m afraid you don’t altogether realize quite what you are talking about. I’m rather afraid you are being foolish, my dear. Married women don’t play with toys, Flute. Whoever would have believed I should have to tell you that? ... And then there’s another thing, too ...”

Granny’s forehead was knitted tightly. Over this clearly, silly, week-day matter, drifted a slightly Sabbatical haze ... Granny, spreading wide her admonishment of Flute, caught in it a little something that reminded her of golden calves, worshipped instead of marketed, graven images, and heathen idols, generally.

Cob the Clown bowed over the daffodils again. Granny shook her head.

“I don’t like to see it, Flute. Indeed, my

85

dear, I do not like to see this ... this ... Who can tell, Flute? Such terrible things have such terribly small beginnings. Think of the men who take to drink, and how it often, all begins with just a sip.... This ... this of course, is only a toy, but, dear me, what do we read about idols, and how people sometimes don’t know the difference? Why, only the other day, I-forget—who was telling me of a lady who bought a Buddha, abroad, thinking it would do for the nursery mantelpiece.... So, there you are, you see, Flute, and how, really, no one can ever be too careful.... Now, my dear, if I were you I would ... Ah! I know, the very thing.... The Forest of Christmas-trees is being given at the Market Hall, for all our Poor Children, next Thursday.... So we’ll put this—that—on top of one of the trees ... the very place.... I always say, Flute, there’s a use for everything, and one is guided to it, if only one shows patience, and is content to wait.”

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Flute promised to be quick, and hurry down for a turn with Granny in the garden, to bid it welcome back from remembering to reality once again.

Flute, in preparation, brushed her hair as smooth as a chestnut just out of its shell. Flute

always liked to please Granny, and avoid as much admonishment as possible; but not even to please Granny could Flute forgo the lovely pricking of the chill, fresh country wind through her hair, the chance of smutless leaves capping her under some low-swung bough....

There was a good deal of shouting going on down in the hall below. Flute, running out of her bedroom, could hear the bustle of Granny issuing directions to the parlourmaid, and lots of people who weren't there....

The shouting died away suddenly. Granny must have gone into the drawing-room to see about the flowers and holly, there....

Flute stood still for a moment in the passage. Oh! It was quiet and cold up there....

* * * * *

A change seemed to have crept over the house—a darkness, wrapping it in grey as though with a veil....

In an empty house—almost an empty house.... One, once full of gaiety and movement, could it be that ghosts came clustering back to a dim reunion, among unmoved furnitures, the only human objects that may bear our impress after we have gone? ... Flute might be fanciful. But she wasn't afraid.

Standing there in the cold passage, Flute felt

soft, chill airs go past, slowly, as though charged with hearts, thoughts, forms unseen. She put out her hand to whatever had gone past her, and closed it round the handle of the box-room door.

Flute opened the box-room door and went in. Yes, there they all were, just the same as ever. All the wrecked, discarded objects Flute remembered from babyhood. How friendly she had always felt towards them!

The chair that Granny scorned just because it missed a back, that old carpet-square, as magic as you please.

There was the mark on the discoloured wallpaper, which always owned three different shapes, and would change from one to another while you weren't looking.

There, quite splendidly, was the big wardrobe, with the drawer no longer above Flute's head, where Granny's best wax doll had been, before Aunt Jane went down to Wych-elms House and, for no reason, took it with her.

There were Aunt Jane's old yellow ninepins in the broken basket still.

And the dear old rocking-horse, with the shabby, ferocious nostrils, only just waiting to creak under a rider.... If he wasn't really creaking already to welcome Flute back again....

88

All the discarded friendliness of the box-room that had only just got a little smaller with passing years.... How *could* Granny say the box-room was the one place in the house that gave her quite the creeps...?

Well! If Granny still avoided it, perhaps Cob might be more safely kept here.... Cob would like the box-room, perhaps, relishing its shelter as a disdained toy may....

"I must go now," Flute whispered to the box-room. "Granny will be sure to be shouting again in a minute.... Oh! I'm very glad indeed to be back in here again—you don't know ... how it's all been rather queer ... but I've—I've—I mean I'm back here just the same, after all. I can't stop now to tell you about it.... Please forgive me for coming in and interrupting...."

Always, Flute wondered why she felt she must speak aloud to the silence of the box-room. And apologize for entering without a knock ... for interrupting some unknown brooding....

"I'll come back. If I may," Flute told the closed box-room door.

She ran on downstairs, only stopping on the half-landing to spin the old schoolroom globe there. Set Africa and America to chase each other merrily through zone after zone, and enjoy with the globe itself a hidden rattling chuckle

89

that she alone, now, cared to twirl it enough to share.

Flute ran downstairs, very fast, jumping the last three stairs of every flight, and then thinking so suddenly of Edward that she nearly went head first down the last flight into the hall.

Granny stood in the hall with a basket clasped in her garden gloves, and such a strong expression of disapproval on her face, it was quite a wonder it did not tear her veil.

"Come along, Flute, bless us all, come along, do! Keeping me waiting like this; well, I never, whatever next? And jumping like that, in your situation, too. Enough to make anyone go downstairs, steadily, I should say.

I'm quite ashamed of you, Flute, and I've no intention of waiting any longer, I can tell you that. Come along, do."

Granny, still scolding, plunged, with her basket into the half-open front doorway, and so vigorously that she and the basket stuck, and were obliged to wait yet a little longer for Flute to dislodge them.

Granny, bustling the gravel of the drive with an admonitory length of skirt, frowned again at Flute's bare head.

"I never. No, really I never did," exclaimed Granny, tackling her long skirt, her sweeping mantle, the basket and her sense of suitability

90

all at the same time. "If ever anyone had to do with queer people, there's no doubt at all but her name is Bessie Lemander. Now why couldn't you put on a hat like a Christian? Upon my word, Flute, I've a very great mind to send you straight back upstairs after one. But, there, you've kept me waiting so long, we shall never get a turn at all if I do, and dear knows what will happen if I don't keep my eye on the violet roots that boy of Jane's Simmons seems to want to dig up, or such-like, directly my back's turned for one minute. Come along, now, Flute; whatever are you stopping for, child? And then, Flute, I'll have you listen to me, if you please, for one minute, Miss ... dear upon us, no,—Mrs., so it is ... and that's just what I wanted to speak about, Flute. Now this is a most serious matter, and so I want all your attention. Don't play with a twig like that—it looks so silly.... Anyone would think I had a granddaughter who wasn't quite right.... Listen, Flute. It grieves me sadly to see ..."

"See what, Granny?"

"You, my dear. Like this, with nothing at all on. No crêpe, I mean. Not even a veil. Nothing. I'm afraid it's a sad business. Now I'm speaking of your own proper feelings, Flute, that I'm afraid you haven't got. Never before

91

have I set eyes on a widow without a single weed, and I'm sorry to say it doesn't speak very well for you, Flute. I don't at all like to think that a granddaughter of mine doesn't know any better than to put on a black coat, and think she's done her duty. Why, when your dear Grandfather died I had crêpe from the carpet up to my chin, all in flounces, so handsomely set on,

and the wide ones at the bottom stiffened in some way, so they stood up by themselves. I've never seen any other dress look so well.

"Another thing, too, Flute. I don't see a button of jet about you. My dear child, jet is quite as important as crêpe, and I ought to know, Flute. Now, this I will do, I don't mind lending you my broken small jet chain just for a short time. It will look better while you are staying with me, and I'll take you down into the Town to buy a new thread for it to-morrow. I wish I might find some thread at home to-night, for I ought to take you to call on your Aunt Jane the first thing to-morrow morning, and it would never do for her to notice you without a little jet at all events.

"We've not been in the habit of passing over things like that in our family, and I'm sure I don't want to be the one to begin now."

* * * * *

At last Granny and Flute had got into the

92

garden. Halfway down the drive, past the curve of the drive, underneath the trees. Soon they would cross the high road leading down into Withy, which cut Granny's garden in two, and never ceased to surprise Flute at its daring.

Granny and Flute crossed the road with nothing but a frown for a passing Ford car.

Granny's other garden-gate clinked together behind them like a bell ringing in warning as they went up into the little wood-belt, standing like an outpost of some invisible forest, brooding greenly beside Granny's vegetables, on the hill-top above the Town.

Here was the country, come upon like a secret, kept by these great elms and beeches. Flute was a town-child, born and bred. The country only her affair by accidental right of visiting.

Why did she always feel it hers, as a heart-beat in her breast?

Here were the trees, tall and lost like wishes, up above her.

Bare, twisted boughs, such as she had pitied, from the train.

But these trees seemed to be pitying Flute instead, clasping branches and twigs in a passion and fervour of strange design. Imploring the Heavens for this pygmy child beneath them.

Why do great trees so furiously rage? In their everlasting stillness, their incredible movements,

93

there is more passion in a tree than in any other familiar of man.

Chill airs held still, and strange, under them. So chill.... Perhaps everything under a tree is bewitched.... Certainly the ground and all its growths, the echoes, the sound of voices, are different.

Even Granny's voice sounded softer, muffled, by as much as a leaf.

Granny was staring at a beech trunk and telling it, rather discontentedly, that she supposed Flute would be rushing off up to the top of Nettleship Hill, directly she could, to see that old Nurse of hers, although, whatever a widowed woman wanted with her Nurse's apron-strings, Granny would only too gladly be told.

"Not that the Withalls haven't always been a most respectable family, seeing that my own nurse, old Sarah, was aunt to this one of yours, Flute. Still, of course, in my young days, a nurse was a nurse, one never tried to make friends with her, and she went away at the proper time, too. When I think how yours only left you a year ago ... Absurd, as I said at the time, and very likely to encourage you in childish ways. As I said to your poor Mother, 'Look how different Flute is to either of her cousins, Bess or Barbara, and I shouldn't

94

wonder if that nurse of hers isn't at the bottom of it....'

"Now, Flute, what are you dawdling behind me like that for?"

"Look, Granny," said Flute, over her shoulder.

"Look where?" asked Granny, wheeling so violently that she came nearly nose to nose with Flute.

Flute waved over Granny's quivering bonnet. They had come out of the wood-belt, and were standing just where Granny's vegetables began. This was the point of Granny's hill-top. Before them, the hill sloped down to the town of Withy, in the valley below.

The dull green of winter made most of the world grey. At Flute's feet, Granny's vegetable earth looked deeply black and soft.

Colour had been stolen out of everything. Stolen by the sky.

Over Granny's bonnet, above the town of Withy, and its mournful, neighbouring hill, incredible glory went by in slow parade. It was not to be believed, this marvel of just before winter sunset. The western sky was cruel in its beauty. There, in every desire of gold, from fire to jessamine, a mocking god built up impossible palaces only to dissolve them more easily than smoke. That god moved his creations aside—to show mountain peaks,

lakes, oceans, seas, and other hidden skies. He moved a cloud-finger.... Brought a new creation to people this domain. Giants, puffed up in a minute. Great flights of swans. Sailing dolphins, breasting the blue and gold expanse. Going past in noble haste from far sea to far sea.

Now the sky was monstrous as an emperor's dream. Now it had changed completely. Was only a wide daffodil wistfulness fading quickly before the coming contradiction of the night.

"Well!" said Granny indignantly, "what about it? What do you want me to look at, Flute, if you'll kindly tell me? Anything I can do to please you, my dear, and I'm sure I'm only too ready; but why I should stand here gaping at nothing in the world but where I cannot see a sign of the celery I spoke about to Whimpey, there's one who knows, perhaps, but I don't. Oh! you mean that cloud? Cloud? Oh! I daresay. Plenty of them about, and always likely to be. Why should I stare at that particular one? Come along, child, quickly, for I must have a look at my violet roots, before dark, cloud or no cloud."

* * * * *

Down into the darkening winter evening garden Granny and Flute went, keeping carefully to the moist path. Granny went first,

talking all the time, her little black figure quivering so vigorously that its movement seemed to lend it colour. Granny almost shone going down the path.

Flute followed Granny dreamily. The sky had faded to dusk, but its lost enchantment still dazzled Flute's eyes.

Now the world's day was at an end. So very soon, the night would never show how nearly one's eyes were closed.... Over in the bushes, under the trees, there was a call. A robin's note came urgently over the garden.

Why so late? Now, the world's day was at an end....

Suddenly, by the desolate currant bushes, Granny wheeled, shaking a frantic finger at Flute.

"Stay still where you are, Flute!" commanded Granny, in a stage whisper that must have been clearly heard all over the town of Withy.

Flute, caught on one leg, remained upon it.

Granny went on frowning and shaking her head, keeping up quite a chatter of beads and sequins.

“Quiet, now, Flute, do try to keep quiet. I don’t want him to know we’re coming. I want to catch him unawares. Come on him

97

suddenly and see what he’s about. Over there like that, doing dear knows what to my violets...

“What Who, Granny...? Where?”

“Tscha! Tscha!” snapped Granny. “Anyone would take you to be wanting, Flute. Who? Why, your Aunt Jane’s Simmons’s Robin, of course. Who else? And where, indeed, if not digging away at my violet-bed over there by the wall.... *What* he’s doing, you may well ask, and indeed, I’ll join you. I should very much like to know, in fact, only yesterday I passed him, and not feeling at all certain, I said ‘Good morning, Robert,’ (I will *not* call a man Robin). ‘Robert,’ I said ‘what you are doing there, doesn’t seem to me at all necessary. I never find Wimpey worrying round this corner of the garden at this time of year. Couldn’t you be better employed? I said distinctly, in rather a meaning way. Of course he only touched his cap, but I must say I thought I did notice ... Oh! Good afternoon to you, Robert....”

* * * * *

After all, every bit of gold had not left the sky. There, above Granny’s bonnet, a daffodil bar shone quite brightly.

There was one long note from the robin,

98

over in the bushes, a whirl of wings, and then no sound but a slow measure of feet, heavy in loamy boots, coming up to them, along the path.

The garden shivered. The garden shrank a little. Even the design of the great beech boughs seemed smaller. Only the sky stayed wide and strange.

Aunt Jane’s Simmons’s Robin came up the path to touch his cap to Granny.

* * * * *

There is a star that dances, then some meetings maybe. There is a fluttering of fate, hard to tell from the beat of a heart under one’s arm.

There is a Chance, so impossible to believe that it needs a star to light it.... And there was no star—as yet. No fluttering but the quiver of Granny’s beads and sequins....

No chance to compare to this certainty....

The Toy-stranger, the Knight of the single grey note, here, in Granny’s garden ... touching his cap to Granny, to Flute, just as if he were feeling his disguise, his cap of darkness, to be sure it still fitted properly.

He stood, respectfully, in their path, his hands were covered with the gentle earth, and under his cap, danced, something like a star, too ...

99

“Madam,” said the Knight of the Note, “Miss ...”

No knight, by trade, or of fable, could have fitted his ladies with a more flattering address....

Granny tossed her head.

“...I daresay they may be the better for it, although certainly it’s never been done at this time of year before. However, I suppose I shall only be told that violet roots have changed, like everything else, nowadays.

“As you’ve started, you may as well keep on.... Certainly, Miss Jane’s violets are always quite a sight. I’ve often said to her, ‘Well, Jane, I never saw the like.... Perhaps you may as well let me know just what Simmons does with yours, although, of course, nothing would induce Whimpey to do any differently with mine. Still, as I very often say ... ‘Your mother keeps well, I hope, Robert, for the time of year?’”

* * * * *

There was only one narrow path up the garden, so they all had to follow it. Granny went first, plunging along past the currant bushes, all a-toss and a-tremble.

Behind them, Flute could hear the slow measure of loamy boots.

100

There was a chance, hanging low, and right over Flute’s head.

Flute, just before the bend of the path, turned suddenly, to catch at it.

The dark, shining eyes, pointing out that smile ... oh! How can one tell some things to one’s own disturbance...?... He must always have smiled like that ... always.... And it was only the week before last that Flute had first seen him....

Flute caught at Chance with her own breath.

“Do you know?” she whispered, “I’ve got him here, brought down in my suit-case, with me.... The—you know, for you gave me some of him ... Cob the Clown....”

* * * * *

Flute did not dare measure the silly way her words must sound, by the sight of his smile.

She ran on after Granny.

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Up in Flute’s bedroom, over a dusky daffodil, Cob the Clown bowed before the coming night.

“Everything is as may be,” said Cob the Clown.

Chapter Five

AUNT JANE lived at Wych-elm House, within some few hundred yards of Granny, although concealed from her by its retiring position, the side of the hill, and the yearly thickening of trees between them.

A sheltered road led from the hill-top to Wych-elms, under its wing.

To go down to Aunt Jane's was the easiest thing in the world, but it was never undertaken without ceremony.

Granny always visited Aunt Jane in rather a formal fluster.

She had, indeed, been heard to say that "she supposed she was welcome, although Jane never said so." But then, as Flute often reflected, Aunt Jane had few words at any time. And perhaps she spent them charily on welcome because nearly all were required to support Granny's graphic demands for Jane to join her in deploring the peculiarities of the Poor.

Flute hardly knew why she was fond of Aunt Jane. She saw very little of her, and that little, never long.

Aunt Jane's garden and tea-parties had a way of ending before anyone else's. And

102

always before you had any idea if the hostess cared for your presence or not.

Wych-elm House was very sympathetic to Aunt Jane.

It was a low, grey Georgian house, gentle and unpretentious, with only a stone path and a simple gate between it and an empty road. Just beyond the road was a river. Flute used to like to pretend that, by night, Aunt Jane's grey stone took magic swirls and eddies as silver water. This being possibly why Aunt Jane's house stood so near the river. As good a reason as any other, thought Flute, whenever Granny took High Heaven to task in her desire to know what on earth Jane wanted her house just there for.

The only undenied beauty of Aunt Jane's house was its garden. All steep flowered slopes, tenderly sheltering the house itself. Flowers grew in Aunt Jane's garden that knew no other soil in Withy.

And, up the side of the house that no one ever looked at, a magnolia graciously attended a niched stone jar.

Aunt Jane might keep her secrets in that jar, Flute used to think.... Funny how one always had fancy thoughts about Aunt Jane, whose Good-bye was warmer than her Welcome.

103

Granny and Flute went down to pay Aunt Jane the exactly calculated compliment of a morning visit. A Christmas sun, sober and pale, shone upon them, and Granny carried a basket, just in case of Jane having anything she wanted taken to one of the Poor.

Granny was never quite at her best without a basket. She kept a pile of them in one corner of her bedroom, and was constantly adding to it.

“What in the world are you doing there? Careful, now, Flute!” said Granny, as Flute detached her cloak from a spoke of Aunt Jane’s gate.

They stood together in Aunt Jane’s deep porch, listening to the remote echo of Aunt Jane’s bell, while Aunt Jane’s parlourmaid gave Granny plenty of time for a selection of nods and winks to remind Flute of her calling manners, her widowhood, and all the things she had better not mention unless Jane spoke of them first.

At last the door swung back into a dark, low hall, with a curled staircase festooning the back of it. Granny plunged forward, crying, “Miss Jane at home?” as if she dared the hall to contradict her, and Flute followed her into Aunt Jane’s morning-room.

“Well, Jane!”

104

“Well, Bessie!”

There was Aunt Jane, just the same as ever. Standing in the middle of a surprisingly sunny room, quiet, colourless, and attended by a number of almost strident things. A sharp bird’s song from a cage in the window. A neat cascade of very brilliant Christmas-cards and calendars depending from her mantelpiece.

Aunt Jane’s fire shone and crackled vigorously. In the middle of it all stood Aunt Jane, very still.

“Flute——” said Aunt Jane, and kissed her.

Always Aunt Jane was just the same. Always glad, one would say, to let things take their course all round her. To disturb no silence. To try after no effect. To dislocate no peace of mind or heart. To keep quiet as a treasure,

to alter nothing, that may have come—who knows?—from God’s own hand....

Her own nieces and nephews had paid her nothing but the most perfunctory attention. Her great-nieces ignored her, quite. Bess and Barbara both kept a special titter for the bare idea of poor Aunt Jane. Only Flute had ever been with her beyond the span of mortal tea-party.

Something flooded Flute’s heart and eyes.

Why had she never noticed before?

105

Seen through the many colours of her childish fancies that Aunt Jane was real as imagination.

Aunt Jane, still, silent, the same. Only lending her quiet spirit for comfort.

Flute knew this now. Knew it because Aunt Jane just said “Flute——” the same as ever. Never disturbed the young morning with a sigh, or put on a sidelong mask of sympathy.

Apparently Aunt Jane remained just the same even when shadowed by widowhood.

There had been so much talk. So much casting of eyes to Heaven.... And now here was Aunt Jane, merely setting an easy-chair for Flute, in Heaven’s own sunshine....

Why! Aunt Jane might have known how Flute really felt....

If Aunt Jane did not sigh, most certainly Granny supplied the deficiency.

Granny sat down in Aunt Jane’s chair, and demolished the peace of a calendar just beside her.

“Dear Jane ... I mean, dear me, Jane. Here you see me, no, I mean, you see Flute, poor child in the deepest affliction. I wish I could say, in suitable weeds, but I’ve been looking through my veils this morning, and I fancy I’ve come on one that may do very

106

nicely. Poor, poor child. Such a situation at her age. Who would have believed it, as I said the day before yesterday to Charlotte Triple? Charlotte, you know, Jane, is never without a grievance. And now it’s her roof leaking, and twins not six weeks ago.

“‘Charlotte,’ I said, ‘the Lord may have visited you. And certainly after the storms we’ve been having, it doesn’t show much sense to be surprised

at anything.

“‘Look at me,’ I said to Charlotte. ‘Here I am with a great bough down all over my winter cabbages, and an extra man in the garden, just at the time of year when there’s nothing to show for it. And not only that, but my youngest granddaughter, a widow right at the church door. Do I complain, or question Providence, in spite of it being a thing no one would ever expect? I hope, Charlotte,’ I said, ‘that, next time I meet you you’ll be in your right mind, and waiting on the Lord, instead of worrying Him about a few loose tiles, just at Christmas time.’ I always say there’s nothing like a word or two of plain speaking, Jane, especially to Charlotte.”

“Charlotte was telling me all about it, yesterday.”

“She was, was she? What a woman she is for gossiping, to be sure. She bothered me

107

with a fine lot of nonsense, but I was too busy to stop all day to attend to her, so I just gave her a trifle, and went on. You be careful, Jane, for if it isn’t one thing with Charlotte, it’s another.”

“Will you be giving Ellen Wartman some beef and pudding on Christmas Eve?”

“Ellen Wartman? Jane! I’m surprised at you. Now there’s a woman I’ve never approved of. They always said her father was like the Wandering Jew, and so he may have been, after attending every church and chapel in the Town in turn, for all the world as if he were trying on different pairs of boots to take him to Heaven.

“And Ellen, herself, whatever did she think she was doing, marrying a man who’d been to prison, even if they did find out it wasn’t his fault, after all?

“And there was her mother as ill as possible, and not a soul told about it, and I had a Charity ticket to spare three years running. I don’t know what you can do with the Poor when they are like that.

“And now there’s Ellen with only one child. No wonder he’s sickly. He wouldn’t always be ailing if he’d had plenty of brothers and sisters to knock a lot of the nonsense out of him, as I told Ellen, myself. Beef and pudding?

108

Certainly not, although if I happen to run across her in the Town, I don't say, mind, that I shan't spare Ellen a trifle."

"Well, then, Bessie, you'll not object to my giving Ellen a cut of beef, and a few slices of pudding, instead...?"

Granny gave such a violent snort that the distressed calendar beside her fell with a flop into the fender.

Granny was giving some attention to its silly situation as Flute heard Aunt Jane, behind her shoulder, say, "Did you notice my new bird, Flute?"

Flute got up and went to the window. Aunt Jane was there already, where the sunshine was strong enough to lend her grey hair a little gold that it had never known, even in her youth.

A love-bird, bright as a spring shoot, cocked its head into a question, chuckling in its little painted feather beard.

"Richard," said Aunt Jane—"since, for all I know, a bird may hate to be called Dicky,—sing Flute a song. Show her you are pleased to see her. Say 'Very Good day!' to Flute, Richard."

"Is he lonely, all by himself, Aunt Jane?"

Aunt Jane smiled, a pale affair in the sunshine.

109

"Not more than the rest of us, I suppose, Flute."

"You generally see them in pairs..."

"He sings," said Aunt Jane suddenly. "If there was another he wouldn't sing. They don't. "Why should they...? And there's not so much music about the world, that one can spare a song ... still, for all that, perhaps one ought to make do, without ... but he seems happy enough, don't you think, Flute? Listen!"

Richard was rather busy looking coyly out of the window. He was still disturbing his beard with his chuckle, and now he added a scratch and a shake to the situation. Then he whistled, wiped his bill very completely on his perch, economically employed the same eye to inspect first Aunt Jane and then Flute.

And at last obliged with a song.

It was such a gay little song. A tiny threading of notes, clear as glass beads. Set in the sunshine of Aunt Jane's morning-room, Richard's song seemed to be a pleasant expression of the friendly feelings of Aunt Jane's familiars.

The comfortable crackles of her fire. The golden dots and dashes tricked out of her furniture by the sun.

The silks of her embroidery were in it. The unexpected glitter of her scissors, thimble and

110

needles. The bells of a pot of winter hyacinths had a share, too, and only a little enterprise was required to trace the merry peal of those other bells on Aunt Jane's Christmas-cards.

The song came to an end with a variegated chuckle.

"There!" said Aunt Jane.

Flute looked polite.

"You heard?" asked Aunt Jane, patting her hair.

"I don't think, quite ..." murmured Flute.

"Richard," said Aunt Jane, "how well you said that. Please say it again. 'Very Good day, Flute.' You notice your own name, naturally, Flute?"

Naturally, Flute was only anxious to oblige Aunt Jane and Richard. And, suddenly, quite naturally, she was able to do so. Richard was chuckling his feathers into a fan. Listening to him, Flute heard those gay little fairy sounds of his making words. Real words. Incredible seeds of fact, coming out as clearly shaped and real as life, imagined.

Flute laughed. Aunt Jane smiled. Richard obliged over and over again without a comma.

"If you listen long enough," said Aunt Jane, "you never know what you may manage to hear, Flute."

"What's that, Jane?" asked Granny, coming

111

across the room. Granny had finished with the calendar, having knocked over several others, in her efforts to restore it to position. "What about listening, Jane? If you are telling Flute that she listens enough, then I'm very sorry to hear you say so.

"I, for one, have never heard of a modern young person paying sufficient attention by half to her elders. And I'm not only thinking of a child like Flute, but of several other people I could mention, who, certainly, should all know better.

"I was sitting on the Board only the other day, and what happens?

“Why, that little George Whittlemore gets up, only a small grocer, with a shop I’ve never been inside of. I knew his father by sight, but I never cared much about the look of this son of his. However, up he got and said the lighting facilities of the Town needed attention. Couldn’t something be done about it, as Sedge Street, where he lives, is as dark as a turnip field?”

“It quite took the Board’s breath away. Whoever heard of bothering about Sedge Street?”

“Why, good gracious, in my young days, the people who wanted to gad there after dark would have carried lanterns, and said no more

112

about it. Speaking personally, as I did to the Chairman afterwards, ‘Speaking personally, Mr. Hartier,’ I said, ‘we hear too much nowa-days of this here-there-and-everywhere idea. People will not try to stay at home.’

“Now there’s old Frances Sukey, for a case in point. She lived with her niece’s family, until her niece’s husband took to Drink so, and pawned the very roof off their heads. I was always seeing her about the Town in those days, but after she went into the Workhouse it was worse. Gad, gad, gad, every day of the week.”

“‘Nonsense,’ I said, when they told me she was only allowed out, sometimes. ‘Nonsense. And I ought to know, since she’s for everlasting coming up to me, asking for a trifle. That young man at the Workhouse wanted to know why I gave it to her. I looked at him very straight, and told him I thought we were probably in for some rain. I should have told him more than that if I hadn’t been afraid of keeping the horses waiting any longer.’ Talking of waiting, come along, now, Flute, do. I must get down into the Town, or else it’ll be lunch-time and not a thing seen to yet.”

“I’m sorry you don’t feel able to stop, Bessie,” said Aunt Jane, “but I was just thinking of taking Flute round the garden.

113

There’s not a great deal to see, of course, considering the time of year, but still, it’s some while now since she has really been round it.”

Granny tossed her head, nearly into some of Aunt Jane’s holly.

“Oh! In that case, very well, then. I’ll be getting on down into the Town by myself. Of course people may ask me if I have my granddaughter with me, as expected, but I daresay it’s of no consequence.

“Good morning, Jane. Flute! On no account let your Aunt let you be late for lunch, remember.”

The clang of the gate closing indignantly behind Granny made Flute and Aunt Jane go rather guiltily round the house.

But round the house was the garden, and a garden is always green and cool enough to excuse many heated human ways.

Aunt Jane’s garden lay about its hill-side, attentive to winter. Keeping winter’s secrets as well as any land, but, for all that, decked with an air of likelihood for Spring. Here, you would say, the first primroses will pearl the year’s first gaiety. There, the daffodils show before the trees are winter weaned.

Aunt Jane’s garden looked well cared for and contented. Its banks and slopes, bosomy, and

114

nicely rounded, all its trees, amiably reflecting the weight of past foliage, let alone present sunny ease.

The sunshine was fine-spun as rare silk. Aunt Jane and Flute walked in it as carefully as though they were clothed only in some frail, treasured fabric.

Out in her garden, Aunt Jane became as remote as the pale sun itself.

Her attention left Flute completely, her blank eyes were filled with absent, rural consideration. It was plain to see Aunt Jane’s spirit about her garden on one of the slight sunbeams.

Flute walked at her side quite contentedly. It was as pleasant as being by oneself to walk with Aunt Jane, whose every word was lost in the nearest bush, since, all the time, she kept her head turned away.

They went through the flower garden, waving sympathetically to imaginary begonias, musk and salvias. They went under damp half-hoops, presently to celebrate summer as pearl and pink fountains. They decided that the winter jessamine had not its equal, all the year through, for gold.

They went under a final damp half-hoop, and saw Simmons, meditating winter greens over against the sky.

115

Simmons was some way off and had his back towards them, but he must have sensed his mistress’s presence, for he rose, bowing over his winter greens.

Aunt Jane looked steadily at the figure of Simmons.

“Flute,” said Aunt Jane, her far-away attention and voice suddenly quite near. “Flute, I’ve been rather meaning to say to you—I wonder, a little, how your Grandmother is with my Simmons’s Robin in her garden? Don’t answer me if you’d rather not, but I shouldn’t be at all sorry to know. Flute,” continued Aunt Jane, as suddenly loudly as though she had exchanged a flute for a trombone. “To tell the truth, in fact, not to keep anything from you, I really never do feel quite certain about something to do with your Grandmother.... You see, your Grandmother has had a very happy life. Of course I know she lost your Grandfather, but that in a way is not so bad as not finding him to begin with. Do you notice, Flute, rather a queer thing about happy people? So often they take away other people’s ease? They never mean it, and always, I believe their hearts are extremely kind. But their hearts are generally a little hard and rough, too. Perhaps that is why they don’t understand very easily. And before

116

they understand they always shout. And it’s the shouting other people remember after they have forgotten the kindness.

“It’s a funny thing ...” mused Aunt Jane, her gaze drifting widely over her winter greens. “When we were girls together, Flute, I always noticed that about your Grandmother. She was nearly always happy. And if she did not get sufficient satisfaction out of anything, she seemed quite able to shake it until she did. Of course, that is all a very long time ago now, and, since then, your Grandmother has really been through a great deal.

“But still I’ve always felt that, in some way, whatever her circumstances have been, your Grandmother has managed to shake them up to suit herself. Very capable, Bessie always was. I remember your Grandfather, saying that, so well.”

It seemed as though her winter greens were successfully urging a claim to Aunt Jane’s attention, when suddenly she turned, and stared into Flute’s face.

“What was I saying, Flute? Oh! Yes! I know. About your Grandmother, and my Simmons’s Robin in her garden. I have felt just a little worried, I own, through not being quite sure how she would treat him there.

“You may have noticed, Flute, how often

117

one catches the expression ‘gentle folk.’ People seldom seem easy in praising others unless they can slip in that word about them somewhere. Only, you cannot always altogether tell from what people say, who are gentle and who are not. Look at my Simmons, Flute, now, if you never have before. He’s the gentlest man I have ever known. He understands all the little tender things in a garden, he expects them and treats them as they need, and is content not to complain when it’s time for them to die. I don’t know what else you want.

“Simmons is fond of his wife and Robin, and goes to church, and never sees me without touching his cap, and he never hurts anything.

“It’s queer the things people say. Now your Grandmother always says that your Grandfather was such a gentleman because he loved her and his children, was pleased with the place where God had called him, and never knew a harsh thought.

“Can you see any difference, Flute? Because I can’t. Although, of course, one has to remember that living alone is just a little apt to make anybody queer. So perhaps I may be mistaken, although it’s such a comfort not to be obliged to think so.”

“Have you spoken to Simmons’s Robin by

118

any chance, Flute? I think he’s like his father, gentle and kind. Only he’s far better educated, and is going to do wonderful things, as we all like to think the young people after us are ready and eager to do. I am interested in Robin, for I see him setting about the world as his father has set about my garden, ever since I came down here to it.”

“Your Grandmother, Flute, is the kindest of women, but I do not think I could quite talk to her like this. You see she shouts before she listens, and it’s never very easy to explain a thing she is not expecting, to a person, at all liable to shout at it. But I do hope your Grandmother speaks fairly quietly to Robin. He’s so used to quiet things, study and a garden, that any loud sound might so easily distract him.”

“Isn’t it odd, Flute, that your Grandmother, who is rather particular about gentle folk, never really recognizes a gentle person when she sees him?”

“Still, we must always remember that your dear Grandmother does a very great deal of good to a very great many, and if it is her way to bustle about it, we cannot expect her to stop and consider any one more than

another. She would tell you that, I expect, and, so often, it is best, I find, to let people speak for themselves.”

119

Aunt Jane’s voice and manner were growing more and more remote. Her spirit seemed floating off over the winter greens, wistfully attending Simmons, on his way out of sight.

Flute stood beside her, feeling a little as though her feet were separated from plain earth by a soft rush of air she had not felt before.

Flute had never known Aunt Jane could speak or feel like this. She had certainly never guessed at any distance about Aunt Jane’s view. Any horizon to her quiet, fireside spirit.

“I have not spoken to you about—your loss, Flute.... I do not often speak to people, somehow, unless I know what it is they lose. Some people,” said Aunt Jane to the winter greens, “some people lose gifts, some customs, some burdens ... and I never know....”

A robin was beside them, suddenly, flirting with the winter ground.

“Is it time for you to go, Flute?” asked Aunt Jane, more space than time suggested by her words....

They turned and went back, through the future rose-fountains, beside the winter jessamine.

Aunt Jane seemed farther and farther away as they drew near the house again.

“If you see Robin, at any time to-day, I

120

wish you would tell him ...” Aunt Jane spoke and stopped. Then said, “But of course you won’t,” as though she were using secondhand words.

Flute looked up at the grey stone jar where Aunt Jane might keep her secrets.

“Why not?” sang the robin who had followed them from the winter greens.

“If I do, I will,” said Flute.

Aunt Jane was looking remotely into another jessamine, so Flute could not be certain if she had really spoken out loud at all.

* * * * *

Up at the top of the house, at the top of the hill.

“There!” said Cob the Clown.

Chapter Six

CHRISTMAS EVE rose very fairly over the town of Withy. Rose indeed, it did, and was, clear as a remembered wish.

Christmas Eve rose all by itself, although Granny did her best to help it by ordering breakfast earlier than usual, and ringing the bell for prayers herself before the parlourmaid could reach it.

Flute sat on a very slippery chair by the dining-room fire, listening to Granny, bringing Bountiful Providence to Book, and watching a sly sunshaft play over the print persons and expressions of Granny's household, all lined along a wall.

Granny prayed with a vivacity which may have astonished a Providence, often so accustomed to the slumbrous and the sleepy, then rose from her knees to look at Flute as one who has begun the day rather better than possible.

Granny was looking very well indeed this morning. Undoubtedly, Christmas suited Granny, giving her ample scope to neglect no benefit of the Poor, neither spare the prick of holly about it.

Although, really, Granny might well be excused for showing some slight air of fatigue this morning, thought Flute, remembering how Granny had sat up last night until nearly half-past ten, and only to listen for Christmas waits, come before their due evening to receive a scolding instead of a trifle. Granny had bustled out twenty times, leaving the drawing-room fire for the front door, letting a blast of air all over the house, icy with her own invigorating words.

But here was Granny at eight o'clock this morning, opening her Christmas cards and letters, wanting to know what on earth Maurice

122

and Minnie meant by saying she must be finding the time of year trying, and sending her a great stupid robin on a silly little card like that?

"As for Maurice and his trying, it's a pity he doesn't remember how trying he was himself, as a young man, very nearly worrying his relations to death because he would be an architect, in the days when we didn't think architects were anything very much. I know he's supposed to have made a lot of money; very well then, it's a pity he can't find something better to do

than waste it on posting a letter; he'd better, by half, have written to poor old Mrs. Rideout, instead."

"Now she does trouble the time of year, if you like, being a year older than I am, and very infirm with it, I'm afraid."

"As for Minnie's robin, the less said about it the better. I could draw a more sensible bird than that, if I ever had a moment to myself, what with one thing and the other."

"And Minnie is not well off, she thinks that's a good reason to waste money, I suppose."

"No, I shall not write and thank Minnie for the silly thing. In fact when I send her the usual small Christmas cheque, I do not intend even to mention it."

Granny finished her breakfast in rather a

123

fluster, urging Flute past all the hurdles in the marmalade, anxiously attentive to the Christmas claims of the day.

"Hurry up, do, Flute! More coffee? Nonsense! Yes, there is a little, but, bless the child, why not ask for it before? You weren't quite ready? I tell you what it is, Flute, you don't seem to realize that, if time and tide wait for no man, you cannot expect your Grandmother to dawdle about. Come along! Come along! Coffee? Yes, of course there's plenty of coffee left. Dear me, bless us all!"

Granny's spirited remarks nearly extinguished the flame under the hot milk.

Granny continued to address the patient, if mulish and imaginary audience, always surrounding her in times of domestic stress. As all Granny's times were stressful the audience was a hard-working one.

And after breakfast it followed Granny about the house, taking the place of her own absent family, and echoing her sentiments in the slam of doors and the dance of dust in unused rooms.

Granny said, "Now! Now! No time to waste this morning!" to room after room.

This took so long that it was quite a surprise when the parlourmaid came to announce. "The

124

old women, 'M, waiting out in the kitchen as usual."

Granny embellished each Christmas Eve with Charity. She sent cards to the rich and gave creditably to the poor.

The Poor came up from the Town and clustered about her. They made quite a parade of it, which was not really unsuitable at this season.

Portions of the Poor had already arrived. They were sitting round Granny's big kitchen, under the pickled hams, muffled in their bags, on hooks over the ceiling. The Poor was rather musty. An odd inevitable scent of old clothes, very little soap, small dingy rooms, and resignation, mingled with the warmth and generous spiced air of Granny's kitchen.

The Poor sat sadly, looking at nothing. Certainly not at the cosy cuts of meat, the nicely striped butcher, ready to divide them, the roundabouts of pudding, the rolls of cloth and flannel, baled up on the kitchen table.

Granny came bustling into her kitchen, nearly shutting its door upon the nose of Flute, just behind her.

"Now! Now! Well, here you all are!" exclaimed Granny enjoyably.

"And not looking quite the thing, either, are you, Mrs. Slowcomb? I'm sorry to see it.

125

Not that—run away, Flute—that—trouble you mentioned, before to me? ... Ah! well ... we must all ... Speak up! Now! Speak up! I'm not deaf, as you know, but a person mumbling at me is more than I can abide. I daresay a slice or two of mutton will do you good? Rather have beef? Oh! I daresay, but you will just have to wait and see which I can spare you most easily...."

Mrs. Slowcomb made signs suggestive of waiting on the Lord's will and Granny's pleasure. Granny looked gratified and hurried on to the next pensioner.

"Well, Sarah Ann Wise, and what have you come up to me for? Ah! ... flannel, is it? Now you know I never like people to ask. Wait, I always say, and the Lord will provide, if only I happen to have a length of the same as I gave you before. That made you a good petticoat; I'm surprised to hear you've worn it out already. And you a single woman. Without a family, I always say, clothes should last just about twice as long."

"A small piece of pudding, now, Cook, Sarah Ann being all by herself. A nephew, coining to you for Christmas dinner? Nonsense, Sarah Ann, I cannot take any account of nephews. Plenty of sons and daughters, now, and I might think about a larger piece."

126

Granny passed on from portion to portion of the Poor. She delivered her opinions to them in packets, and ordered their meat and pudding according to their deserts, and reproductive efforts.

Granny always liked the Poor to do its duty. To thank, to curtsy, to speak up and look down. Especially did Granny approve of the Poor on the increase.

A nice large family, now, said Granny, even if there is always the danger of it merely coming upon the Rates.

Granny had set a good example in this way herself, and, in her eagerness that it should not remain unfollowed, ribald persons reported as how Mrs. Lemander should say, It's a pity you don't seem to have seen fit to have done your duty, and that to Sarah Ann Wise, who, seeing she wasn't married, 'twas just as well she hadn't.

Flute followed Granny about the kitchen,. followed herself, at unexpected moments, by sly glances from the Poor.

The Poor had heard all about Mrs. Lemander's Miss Flute's affair, and all the expressions of the Poor suggested that its absence of teeth, not implying absence of tongue, no doubt her situation would receive as much attention as her Grandmother's beef or mutton.

127

At last Flute came to shelter beside Cook's apron. Cook had been Cook for many a Christmas Eve. She had her own opinions about most of Granny's pensioners, and most of her opinions were clear-set upon her countenance.

Directly Granny's back was turned, Cook descended into the bleating fold, and shoo-ed some especially hardy annual out of the back door.

"And you be guided by me, Miss Flute, and don't you pay no great heed to the like of that there Louisa Hams. Talk of a beggar, well, you may as well keep your tongue still, for all the good it'll do. And I'll tell you what. If she's been in here once, this morning, she's been in here three times. In at one gate, and then in at the other."

"I wonder your Grandmother doesn't see through her. There she is, now, standing crying at the back door. Says Mrs. Lemander promised her a new petticoat."

"Don't you say I told you, Miss Flute, but your Granny's last good petticoat was two glasses of gin down at the Goose and Gosling, before she'd been off the premises ten minutes."

“Begone, with you—you, Louisa, there!”

“I tell you, Miss Flute, poor or no poor, your Grandma does manage to get some

128

...of the worst of the Town up here, taking her in.”

“Ah! You would come back again, would you?”

Granny’s back was turned, and very busy over a Poor Person whose poverty was not that of guile, for she had brought with her a small boy in large boots, setting him constantly with his sniff in Granny’s direction.

It was well known among the Poor that any child was a sure draw with Mrs. Lemander, and the unmarried Poor Persons on each side kept on giving her glances, full of anything but the right spirit—far more suggestive, in fact, of being quite able to do the same thing themselves, and only prevented by delicacy of feeling.

Granny had been scolding an old man who had got in by mistake; she sent him off to tell his wife to come instead, and so was feeling even more determined than usual.

All Granny’s most spirited sentiments were kept for the children of any class. Granny always approached them vigorously, clucking and tossing her head.

The bravest child was moved to terror by Granny’s display of natural approval. Only the very poorest children remained unimpressed, pinched from the rear, and waiting dully on the result of so much animation.

129

“Pretty little fellow,” cried Granny now. “A pride to you, I daresay, Mrs. Lawrence, and, I hope, a credit. A pity about his squint, but no doubt you are used to it. And I’m sorry to see red hair. It’s always a misfortune; still, what are appearances, after all, except the Lord’s will, as I always say?”

“His ears stick out, don’t they? And I suppose he’s too old now for you to hope to alter that.”

“Well! I’m glad you thought of bringing him up with you, and—wait ... I’ll just see ...”

Granny went to the kitchen table, and started turning over the rolls of flannel.

She called for Flute.

“Flute! Flute! Here, come here, child. Can you see the pink flannelette? That nice piece with a stain on the selvedge, that won’t make a bit of difference to Amy Lawrence, and if it did she ought to be grateful. Dear me, Flute, your fingers are certainly all thumbs! There! Now you’ve let go your end!”

Granny was picking up roll after roll, urging Flute on to the other end, and then, at once, twirling it out of her hand. The air was full of spinning bales, and soon the floor was getting its share, too.

Flannel flew in all directions.

130

The kitchen table might have been bewitched, its contents so suddenly flying about it. Granny, getting excited, scolded each flapping, animated roll.

The pungent odour of warming flannel attended her reproof, a suitable incense.

Now, whether it was the exciting smell of the flannel, or the sight of so much coveted material flying, unconsidered, between earth and Heaven, but, all at once, there was a strange movement on the part of all the Poor.

The Poor were practically entitled to meat and pudding. It was theirs by right of poverty, year after year. But Granny’s flannel was only attained by whining. An extra piece of generosity, obtainable by the performance of a certain number of tricks.

Any Poor Person, however well equipped with beef and pudding, would festoon the back door, all the morning, waiting to catch Granny’s flannel-eye.

This morning Louisa Hams had proved quite undetachable. Even Cook’s ominous apron powerless to make her move on.

Now, without warning, she walked straight round Cook and the nicely striped butcher, full tilt back into the kitchen again.

She went up to Granny, her whine suddenly sounding masterful.

131

“That’s it, that’s what I want, ’M,” croaked Louisa, as loudly as any bird of prey. “That nice bit o’ red flannel, there; I’ve had my eye on it all the morning. And I could do with a yard or two of the grey, if you ain’t going to cut it up for them as don’t deserve it.”

Granny gasped. Never in all her generous years had she dreamed of, let alone been forced to listen to, such amazing sentiments on the part of the Poor.

Granny's mouth fell open. The roll of flannel she held fell with a fat flump to the floor.

Granny stared quite wildly into the close grin of the rebel Louisa.

All round the kitchen, there was a strange movement.

Louisa's unheard-of behaviour had been a signal for the most incredible scene.

Every portion of the Poor left its seat, came in a covetous, carrion flock up to Granny's kitchen table. Seized hold of roll after roll. Jerked them about. Pulled out yard after yard. Measured, from dingy outstretched hand to doubtful nose. Chattered, gibbered, possessed....

The last might possibly be first in another world, but never had Granny expected to see it round her own kitchen table.

132

Yet, actually, it was happening.

The clamour of it growing louder.

Arguments rising over the flannel. Black looks smudged over grimy faces.

Mrs. Lawrence and Louisa Hams had fallen very foul of each other over the pink flannelette.... Strange, indeed, strange sounds were assaulting Granny's kitchen ceiling, and the shrouded hams, there....

If it hadn't been for the nicely striped butcher Flute really wondered what would have been the end of it.

For Granny could only gasp, and even Cook seemed a victim of the unbelievable.

But the butcher came bravely into the fray, hustling all those scrag-ends of humanity about, with a competence suggesting a carving knife.

"Now, then, Mother," said the butcher brightly. "What you've got, you 'ave, and what you 'aven't got, just don't you touch. 'Tain't no manner o' use behaving like this, and all in a lady's kitchen, what you 'ope to get something out of, next year, if you're spared. Now, all o' you go home, and remember the shortest way's the quickest. No going out o' one gate, and back in at the other. 'Tain't nobody's job to give you beef and mutton three times over, and if Mother Hams don't leave that flannel alone, pretty quick,

133

it'll turn into a glass o' gin, in front of her there on the table...."

The butcher's apron commandeered the situation. In a pleasant, marketable manner, the butcher got the disjointed world into place again.

Rebels converted back into patient Poor, worthy widows, and succourable spinsters.

The rebellion gibbered a little, then went curtsying sheepishly out of the back door.

Cook heaved a sigh of relief that waved the ham above her head.

The butcher doffed his apron and winked at her.

The flannel was left at peace all over the kitchen floor and table. All wrapped up in it stood Granny, fumbling with her purse like a suddenly strange object.

She gave the butcher two half-crowns, as one paying an entrance fee into some strange place.... Then, without warning, Granny tossed an undazed head, spirited as ever.

She pushed the flannel aside, and hurried to the window, shaking a finger at the departing butcher.

"Mind, now, mind!" shouted Granny through the glass. "Latch my gate after you, as you go out. Don't let it swing, whatever you do. And don't forget to credit me with

134

those two pieces of mutton. Well, I never! If he hasn't gone without waiting to hear what I had to say to him. I don't altogether take much to that boy. And I do not feel he should have spoken about gin to my old women. It's always a pity to put ideas into people's heads, let alone suggesting they should come back again for more than I've given them already. Mrs. Lawrence and poor Louisa certainly were a bit above themselves this morning, but I should never care to think a thing like that about anybody."

135

Chapter Seven

CHRISTMAS EVE proved to have dawned so dizzily, no wonder Granny spent the next few hours of it, feeling decidedly put out.

Cook, of course, was above correction, and the nicely starched competence of the rest of Granny's household made them difficult to scold; but Flute, attached to Granny merely by ties of blood and affection, found herself, for over an hour, in the thankless position of a twig in a high wind.

Granny charged all over the house, scolding every door-mat, and insisting on Flute's company, that she might share reproof, too.

By lunch-time, the blameless airs of so many empty rooms had exasperated Granny past her always frail endurance, and, to titivate the climax, Granny, plunging even into the box-room, had received such a start, owing to a deep bow from Cob the Clown, concealed there, that her upbraidings of Flute became almost Biblical.

"To think of it, Flute, to think of it! Not that I like to, but how can I help it? A great girl, a woman of your age, a married person, a widow! And playing with toys, still, no matter what I say, and so slyly, too, right behind my back! Not for one other moment will I tolerate the heathen thing in my house. There's an expression on that creature's face, Flute, that I don't at all like. Look at me, Flute! Look at your Grandmother! Did I play with dolls after I left the nursery? Why, certainly not, knowing full well the way to be ashamed of myself, as I hope I did. I don't suppose I ever in my life looked at a doll after the age of twelve.... Never mind. This decides me.... This very afternoon, down that nonsensical thing goes to the Forest of Christmas Trees, for our Poor Children in the Market Hall."

136

"And we go, too, Flute, so on no account be late, now, after all the trouble you've caused me, as it is."

Granny, always as good as her word, proved, this time, to be rather better.

Flute, after lunch, peeping secretly into the friendly dusk of the uncaring, Christmas box-room, found nothing of Cob but a fragment of frill where he had been snatched away.

Flute quickly told herself, that, of course, only a toy, and it didn't matter.

But a certain, if small, weight seemed to close upon her, with the box-room door. Suddenly Flute ached, somewhere. Perhaps it was only her head.

Granny's voice, shouting down in the hall, was, all at once, rather oppressive.

Granny's point of view, that had, now, permeated even the box-room, seemed to be raising all the dryness and dust of life, and scattering it about her.

Affection, in Flute's heart, felt a little dry, too. Flute had always accepted her family's decisions. Why need she endure, into the bargain, the constant vigorous driving of all those decisions home?

Flute, never a rebel, felt as though charged with holding up the red flag instead of the family banner.

137

Uncharged, perhaps, she would never have noticed that her arms were beginning to ache, just a little....

However, no matter what Flute might notice, lucky it was that no noticing of any sort troubled Granny.

"I find it very easy to see," said Granny, "that your Aunt Jane is anything at all but what I should wish. During the last few months, certainly, she has changed decidedly, and not in the right direction. Now, you know your Aunt Jane, poor thing, was not ever at all strong. White and a trifle whimsy looking. I believe your dear Great-grandmother hardly expected to rear her. Many's the time I've thought very little of Jane's appearance. So it doesn't surprise me at all that she doesn't feel up to the Forest of Trees this afternoon."

Up into the trees above her own head looked Granny. She and Flute were going side by side down the drive, to go down into the Town to the Market Hall and the Poor Children to be entertained there.

Granny was speaking quite quietly and confidentially. For sometimes, under her great elms and beeches, Granny's voice waned into a whisper, almost as though Granny found herself in some unsuspected place of worship.

138

Encouraged by Granny's confidence, Flute tried to nod as one widow to another.

But Granny was not going to have anything of that sort. When they reached the road, Granny looked behind her several times. Flute, doing the same, met with a brisk rebuff.

“Now, Flute, no need for you to keep turning about like that. Why in the world should you stare at young Robert out of the garden, just because he’s tall enough for me to tell him to come along down and reach the top toys off the Christmas-trees?”

“Did you, Granny?”

“Now, no more questions, Miss—Ma’am. More’s the pity that you aren’t thinking of your own sad situation instead of worrying me with ‘Why this?’ and ‘Why that?’”

Granny changed her basket from one arm to another sharply, but Flute fancied she noticed a desire to change the subject, too.

And, another backward glance at Robin Simmons, coming easily down the hill at a respectful distance behind them.

Flute’s throat tightened a little.

No, indeed, better turn no more to see the easy, untrammelled walk of Aunt Jane’s Simmons’s Robin, setting so simply out and down about the world.

* * * * *

139

The airs of the town of Withy were very quiet this afternoon. Granny and Flute, trotting sharply downhill, met some blue wreaths of smoke, too lazy to rise. A festival hush lay, softly as smoke, over the Town. Out in some far distance a solitary bell jewelled the bright afternoon.

Always, in the country, you can hear, if you listen, some remote bell, from some unmapped village, just as, always in town, some slight, forgotten tune, from a past street organ, will rise, under the roofs, on any quiet moment between heavy sounds.

Flute felt remote, herself, drifting far away.

It was odd, Flute thought, how lately she so often imagined her body securely fastened, as ever, to ordinary things, while her spirit seemed floating just a few inches above it.

How quaintly pleasant it would be, this gay, country afternoon, to float away altogether, with the light indifference of a balloon, exchanging a little

happy time of day with the smoke-wreaths before drifting off to discover the secret of the early winter sunset.

However, there was no drifting to be done with Granny, just about to enter the Market Hall....

The Market Hall was very gay itself, with

140

red and green paper wreaths set about the walls to surprise the spiders up in the roof.

The countryside must have been ransacked to supply so many fir trees, and all arrested at just the same stage of growth.

Black-green and serious they stood, in rather a sad circle, roped into the middle of the Market Hall.

Their fruits of tinsel, wax and paint balanced about them, among the candles.

The Trees bore this seasonable change with resignation. Except when it came to the candles. For not a single candle would any single Tree hold straight.

Candles guttered to right of twigs, candles dripped desperately to left of twigs. And waxen pearls of candle-grease decorated most of the branches, on their own.

It was quite hot, close to the Trees, a deep warmth coming from them, too strong and serious to be laid to such small candle-account.

Flute felt her face suddenly burning, and turned away.

All round the Trees was a rope, and, a few feet beyond it, another rope. Between the ropes circled the Tree-tenders, and a few of the most impressive citizens of the Town.

Beyond the second rope the shadows of the Market Hall made merry until the school-children

141

and other unimpressive persons should be allowed in. There was a loud buzzing outside the Hall. A buzzing that strengthened and grew. It was only the waiting children, of course, but there was a strength and depth about it, which made Flute turn again to the Trees ... the sound might so easily be an echo of their deep warmth, translated....

Cob the Clown bowed to her from the top of the nearest Tree. There he sat, a flickering candleshade over his face, changing his expression, every

minute, and lending his loose body unexpected movements. Cob, so near and yet so far....

Another flicker made him laugh at her.

“So you don’t seem to think it’s any laughing matter?” said Cob the Clown....

The rope round the Trees quivered under Flute’s hand. The whole Hall shivered suddenly, and an enterprising spider fled, under Cob’s foot, up to the roof again, as the school-children came in, bringing a violent draught with them.

Between the ropes, all the impressive citizens shivered. Even Granny’s ostrich tips shook upon her bonnet, and the sable tails round her sealskin mantle swung from side to side, as if peeling protest.

Still the children came pouring in. A stream

142

of little dark forms, starred with little white faces. And eyes, dark with desire, seeing nothing but the Trees.

The ropes swayed sympathetically with the children. Bulging out into bays, largely scolloping the impressive citizens’ space, until corrected by a reproachful Tree-tender.

“Be careful, there, children!” said a small schoolmistress. But her pince-nez glittered like tinsel, and it was not towards the children that it turned.

Flute looked, with the children, at the Trees. She looked and looked again for magic about them. What was the wonder hidden in their branches?

Here were no marvels of delicate, artistic malice. No mocking presentations of the world’s creatures as they might be.

No plush delights of bears, no singing-tops or rainbow balls.... Hardly any Dolls. And those such queer, poor specimens, stiff and incompetently jointed, dreadfully sparse of charm. Cob the Clown, up on his Tree-top, was obviously laughing down at them. He could not possibly feel at home, here ... and yet ... could he? ...

For the air round the Trees was full of bliss. It echoed “See’s,” and “Look’s” and “Lovely’s” on every side. The whole world hung

143

over with tinsel surprise, festooned with tinsel-bright eyes and Christmas rose cheeks beneath them. There wasn’t a child behind the bulging rope

who was not shivering in the draught of the Market Hall, as in the clear waters of the rivers of Paradise.

The toys on the Trees might have materialized out of their own wishes. And, if those wishes were poor and humble, perhaps it only shows how little is needed to gladden the heart of the child of man.

Flute, staring at them, saw the children's faces shining brightly as flames, and the Trees before them sway and swell.

* * * * *

It was time for the distribution of gifts. The swinging rope could hardly bear the suspense of waiting a minute longer. But first of all a hidden harmonium gave an excited squeak, and burst nervously into a string of carols.

The children, their eyes enticing the Trees, sang lustily of Mangers and Magi and Gifts and Goodwill.

Flute stood as near the children as she could. It was so warm there, where the children's pleasure met the deep sparkling heart of the candled Trees.

During the carols, Flute looked about her.

144

It was not easy to distinguish faces beyond the first file of the children's, but a smile above their heads met Flute's dazzled eyes.

There was Nurse, smiling at her. Nurse, come down, from her cottage fastness at the top of Nettleship Hill, to see the children, bless them, and to catch a glimpse, as well, of her own dear child.

Miss Flute, to Nurse, for ever the same. Whatever the world might do to Flute, what matter to Nurse, knowing the world's changes as nothing at all but fancy dress?

There was Nurse's smile, caught above the children's heads like a benediction.

A gentle air, Nurse carried about her, a consoling way with her, comforting as light softened by stained glass. All Nurse's views were stained with peacefulness, trust and a love that cannot falter. Looking now at Flute, Nurse made a little movement with a hand encased in a home-knitted glove.

Flute glanced round her hastily. Ducked under the delighted rope, and went up to kiss Nurse, almost cheered by the carolling children.

“Once in Royal David’s City,” announced all present, heartily. Even Granny was too busy about it to notice Flute, causing quite a fluster among the lesser citizens of the Town of Withy.

145

Now the carols were over, and, really, the presents were going to begin.

All of a sudden the Trees came into action. They were quivering and shaking, and waving their boughs, dripping toy after toy out of the candle-grease.

Tree-tenders of all heights had to pretend the highest bough well within reach.

Soon even Cob was shaking as if with laughter.

“Good-bye, Cob, Good-bye,” said Flute under her breath.

She looked round at the eager children. Nice little things, but she could not see any speciality specimen, worthy of Cob.

Back to the Trees again.

“Oh! Dear me!” a small schoolmistress beside her was saying. “Do you suppose Robin Simmons could reach him?”

And there was Robin coming up the aisle between the Trees.

He was walking through the Christmas Trees as through a garden. Gently, carefully, stopping to consider each small affair of guttering candle, or pearling grease.

A sharp, harsh scent came wavering to Flute on a thread of smoke.

But Robin had nipped the bud of flame, and was easing the burnt bough of a tin candle-clip, as kindly as possible.

146

He looked as tall as some spirit of a Tree himself. Just as supple and slender, and careful of the very least of leaf or twig. Standing there, behind a Tree, its shadow went over him, went over a familiar.

Then Robin came out to smile at the children, to confer with the little schoolmistress, and you would say he was familiar with nothing but rather mischievous gaiety.

“What? The little man right up there at the top?”

“Yes, please, Robin. Mrs. Lemander gave him to the Tree, but I’m sure I don’t know who put him up there. He may look very well, but he’s quite out of reach.”

“Well, perhaps he’s really a King, and asked someone for a throne.”

“Oh! Dear me, Robin, now please don’t start making things up, Eke you used to at school instead of answering properly. I’m sure many’s the time I’ve said ... Dear, dearie me, how *are* we going to get the thing down?”

“If you go calling a King names like that, Miss Mittle, aren’t you afraid he’ll exile you and then you’ll never get him down at all?”

“Robin. Not another word, please. You’re not the least help to me...”

“But I’m going to be in a minute, Miss

147

Mittle. For I’m just going to pick you up, so you can lift Cob the Clown down yourself....”

“Robin! I forbid you. Positively forbid you.... Oh! really, Robin, you are a naughty boy....”

The delighted children swayed the rope right up to Robin and Miss Mittle.

“Yes, please, Robin.” chuckled some bold spirits.

But Robin was patting Miss Mittle’s little best-bloused shoulder.

“Not when I’m really here to help ... yes, really, teacher ...”

The children’s eyes were glittering for Robin. The rubbed rope shone. Robin must be the hero of many a mischiefade....

Half the hall, it seemed, was echoing a husky “Robin” up to startle the spiders in the roof.

Robin turned, from them, right round to smile at Flute.

Robin, with the black-green Trees behind him; Flute, with a jewel-setting of children’s faces.

Robin had a smile, whimsical as wind in the trees.

“Is it a King for a Queen?” said Robin. “Could you play with a Doll? Miss? Or let a Doll play with you?”

“Sometimes things get turned about.

148

Haven’t you noticed? I’m not afraid of Cob. He’s a friendly sort of Doll; but if it was a Queen, up there instead, right at the top of the Tree, do you think I’d ever dare to reach right up to her, from down here at the bottom?

“Perhaps not. Perhaps ...” said Robin, out of the garden, pointing his smile at Flute, like an arrow....

Impressive and unimpressive, all the citizens of Withy were beginning to close in on the Trees. The unimpressive agog for the remaining gifts. The

impressive anxious for the remote refreshment of tea.

Robin went in among the boughs of the Tree behind him. His slim body was clothed in branches, his arms went up to the top of the Tree as to the neck of an old friend.

Flute stared at him. What was it about this strange Robin, of only Aunt Jane's Simmons? He spoke and moved, free of the world....

What had he that no one else of Flute's acquaintance possessed?

Where had Robin, out of the garden, learned to master two situations that, in Flute's family, would only have been fumbled at?

Fancy Edward ...

In a cramp of panic, Flute found herself positively fighting the fancy of Edward....

149

The effort made her burn all over.

Surely it was terribly hot in the Market Hall? Why didn't they put out the Tree-candles? Those near Flute were scorching her cheek....

Robin was coming out of the Tree.

Its boughs giving him up reluctantly to the world again.

In his arms was Cob the Clown.

"Miss," said Robin, "look how near I've been to the top of the Tree.... And here's Cob, bowing to come back to you. You'll never let them take him away, again ... Miss?"

"Miss?" repeated Robin.... Was he laughing under that form of address?
...

* * * * *

The air outside the Market Hall was very dark and cold, even in the shelter of Granny's sealskin mantle.

"What's that you've got wrapped up under your arm, there, Flute? Not some silly toy, I hope? I cannot expect to be upsides with you and the way you seem to want to be always playing, Flute, but I can only hope you haven't got something there that should by rights be giving pleasure to some poor child. Leave everything in its place, and never take a person out of theirs. That's a motto of mine, and I've never yet seen any reason not to think it's a good one.... Come along, as fast

150

as you can, now. Tea! Tea! It'll do you more good to hurry than it will my silver teapot to get cold."

* * * * *

Under Flute's arm.

"Cold? Cold? Well! It's only a silver teapot that's likely to be cold tonight.... People aren't pots, of course, but, for all that, I could tell you ..."

said Cob the Clown.

Chapter Eight

SO soon Christmas is nothing but a large provision of folded parcel paper and string, holly hanging askew, and a great many letters, with very little inclination to answer them.

Granny and Flute bore a considerable burden of Christmas between them.

Granny had ordered lavishly of every sweet and fruit, approved by the taste of her absent family. She and Flute faced each other for a week, over the dining-room table, complete with all its leaves, and so many dishes that a normal appetite wilted away.

Flute was quite embarrassed at Christmas dinner, catching the parlourmaid's eye over ah the mince-pies and plum pudding.

She felt easier when Granny raised her glass, rather shakily, to "Absent Friends." There were many of them, nearly everyone Flute could think of, in fact.

But it was quite a relief to feel that those indifferent shades, at any rate, were bidden to surround Granny's generous board.

...However, once Boxing Day was over, life became a little less lavish.

Granny, having refused the demands of the unjust, and given the just a good deal more than was necessary, concluded Christmas for the Town of Withy.

Flute possessed a birthday just in the New Year. It was a frowned-upon festival, blighted from the beginning. Everybody objected to Flute's birthday. What did she want with it, then, just after Christmas, and, surely, presents enough? From Boxing Day to her birthday eve, Granny made a point of explaining to Flute how fortunate she had already been. When the day itself dawned Granny always flouted it, and never gave Flute a present till nearly twelve o'clock. For some time beforehand she inquired, indignantly, at intervals, whether Flute was, by any chance, expecting anything?

Flute, relieved from Christmas pressure, no longer followed Granny about, for fear that her

constant presence might suggest something of the asking altitude of the Poor.

It was the turn of the year, the reluctant time that is dark with dreams.

Each day dawned, wizened at birth, worn so quickly to an end.

The whole world seemed half-asleep, quite indifferent.

The garden always trailing wisps of mist.

The clouds above it too heavy for the trees.

The smoke of the last bonfires rose mournfully as incense burning before a forgotten god.

The night came quickly to ease the dreariness of earth.

Flute, drifting about the house and garden by herself, felt like a person without a name. As though she belonged to no one, and was nothing.

Not really such an unpleasant sensation. It was certainly easier than being Someone so definitely that everybody else either nudged or stared.

Flute's widowhood seemed to be drifting off like smoke. Even Granny only mentioned it mechanically, the servants addressed "Miss Flute" in spite of all Granny's reproofs, and Nurse, visited on Nettleship Hill-top, had

153

declared "all of it such a mistake as never was." A remark Flute was careful not to repeat to Granny, who never approved of Nurse, and would probably have retaliated by treating Flute in more widowed a way than ever.

Certainly life was easing off, generally.

Granny might sigh to Heaven at intervals, but Granny shared with any child an ability to notice but one thing at a time, and that the nearest.

Modern people, really, put so little of their trust in widows that Flute's situation hardly called for comment enough to keep gossip warm.

There was Edward's Will, too, just a little restricting to enthusiasm. Not to mention poor Whimpey, hardly any the better for his bottle of Christmas port, and Jane, if not actually ill, certainly ailing, and not quite the thing.

Granny bustled from one matter to another, and so left Flute to tend her own widowhood as she pleased.

What pleased Flute was the sense of space that suddenly became her property.

Willow Hall was wide and gracious. With Granny bustling into room after room one was obliged to agree that it was empty, but,

154

released from Granny's active skirt-pleats, Flute enjoyed a sureness of airy ease.

Why are people so afraid of loneliness?

And why do they always see solitude in large, attentive rooms and gentle, uncrowded places? When each man carries his loneliness in such a little space—inside the few inches of his own breast.

Flute had never felt so simply at peace.

The dark, December world served her very well as a friendly country.

Shrouded days only meant that no one would trouble to stare.

An empty house, that indeed there was no one to care to do it.

The house, the house itself, took possession of its creatures. Flute, drifting through the rooms, noticed the brooding air of the box-room everywhere. Furnitures and ornaments, strange and pensive. An odd life of its own was noticeable, Flute thought, about the most insignificant chair.

Sometimes she spoke aloud in apology to the dusk, gathered as a presence of guests, in the great rooms.

There was no answer except, occasionally, a dream, half-remembered, the following night.

"I wish, in a way, I understood. How glad I am that I don't understand anything,"

155

drowsed Flute to herself, opposite Granny, at the evening's drawing-room fire.

A strange enchantment had her in fee.

All the outside world was strange, but was it stranger than Flute's affairs themselves?

Flute sometimes thought she must be seeing everything through glass.

Or else that a cobweb was spun over the world. There seemed no need either to think or to feel. The beating of one's own heart took up all the universe, and yet, how could one be certain of a heart at all?

"I am enchanted," thought Flute, "enchanted not to care."

For three dark days she did not trouble to look out of window, but a wisp of frightened winter sun sent her to the dining-room panes, one idle, after-breakfast moment, and she saw Robin Simmons, gravely considering a path he was following.

Flute leaned her head against the glass. It was odd how contented she felt whenever she caught sight of Robin. There was some unquestionable

rest for the heart in his gentle, measured manner.

When she thought of Robin Simmons, Flute felt almost more peaceful than ever.

Yet, at the same time, she could have sworn to the queerest feeling as of raising herself

156

only to find every limb bound by a cobweb strand.

Granny was very busy indeed out in the kitchen. Whiffs of Granny's housekeeping voice came through an opening door at intervals, but they were lost in the hall, offered up, indulgently, in the benign blue smoke of the elm-log fire there. The sweet, vivid wood-scent made the hall its own. The hall was never quite free from it. Even during those months supposedly Summer's, and bringing bright paper fans instead of fuel to fireplaces, Granny's hall always smelt of the Somersetshire incense—smoke of logs burning somewhere—not far away.

Flute trotted through the hall, slid, apologetically, round the door into the drawing room.

Why not go and see the chrysanthemums in the Conservatory? Granny was always telling her to go, or asking why she hadn't been.

Granny, herself, was always on the point of going, and always being put off the point by so many things to attend to, first, and no one to tell her what they were going to ask her for, until they asked her for it just at the wrong moment.

The Conservatory lay, politely, at the extreme end of the long, double drawing-room.

157

It was quite a walk to get there, and not a very easy one, for the drawing-room floor was so slippery, the drawing-room rugs so insinuating, there were so many chairs, such a splendid show of small tables, in fact such a quantity of things to stop and give attention to, that the most ardent flower-lover had, before now, been becalmed midway in the pursuit of Flora.

Flute manipulated the drawing-room very neatly. Rugs trying to be rafts had no terror for her, and every crafty table corner had echoed, "Careful, now, careful!" at her approach, since babyhood.

There was only a short struggle with the stiff-necked handle of its door before Flute found herself in the Conservatory.

A town girl, Flute never took flowers as a matter of course.

The flowers had the advantage of her, always taking away her breath before she could assemble her phrases to greet them.

A great many flowers all at once, always went to Flute's head, dazzling her eyes, scenting her nostrils, beating upon her senses like music in her ears.

Never could Flute quite believe that flowers are silent. How can it be silence, this whirl of colour, this quivering stillness of perfect

158

shape, scent, coming in waves, and waves again?

The chrysanthemums in Granny's Conservatory gave Flute a positive shock.

Somehow she had never guessed at so many. Glorious, weighty mops of beauty, mocking a little the domesticity of their surroundings.

All the chrysanthemums seemed extremely busy. Granny herself would have applauded the way they curled and went on curling their petals, and the pungent persistence with which they scented the Conservatory's air.

The smell was as sharp and vivid as wood-smoke's. Like a spell in action it rose, and quickened the beating of Flute's heart. Flute buried her face in the nearest fairy mop. All of her face, and that was easy.

She was still so engaged when the garden door opened, and Robin Simmons came in.

Ever since she arrived Flute had met Robin at intervals. Out in the garden, taking a little wintry exercise, Flute had come upon Robin, the gardener, sheltered by trees and bushes that seemed glad to be about him. They had exchanged the time of day and every intimation that, here, a gracious mistress spoke to her respectful servant.

At the back of Flute's mind, a little feeling hanging, neglected, that this was not a particularly

159

gracious way of greeting the double donor of Cob, the person, who had, in her loneliest hour, consented, for her beguiling, to understudy a Fairy Prince.

Flute, putting aside her memory of her own pressings and pinchings of Robin's arm at the Toy Fair, her own secret sharing of confidence, let alone her own whispering behind Granny's back, felt more than a trifle ashamed of herself.

But what could she do?

How could she tell Granny about very friendly feelings for a gardener?

How impossible, when Granny said, "Good morning, Robert, I'm glad to see you at work so well," to follow up with—

"And, I've been working, too, Toy-stranger, thinking over our meeting, and the fancy of finding you, here, and, really, how pleasant you always seem."

At any rate, Robin seemed perfectly unconscious of the way of the world, except its floral one.

He always stopped working at Flute's approach, bowed, and pointed a very direct smile at her. Indifference, probably. After all, what had a gardener to do with a temporary mistress's granddaughter, her whims and wilfulness?

160

Robin Simmons was a worker, with his own way to make about the world.

That he had understudied a Fairy Prince, and left a picture, bright in Flute's memory, was, most likely, much the same to him, as a smile at a child, or a gentle joke with a past school-teacher.

Robin, doubtless, was one of those beings born, for no reason, in any sphere, and born with Puck's smile, Fortune's favour and a way with him, enviable as the Philosopher's stone. One, born to get on ... higher and higher at each step.

And here, now, was Robin, alone with Flute in the Conservatory.

He had a garden-basket in his hand, and a smile, which, thought Flute, fresh from the chrysanthemum, didn't seem to have climbed quite as far as his eyes, this morning.

"Good morning," said Flute, and thought again how almost overpowering chrysanthemum scent can be. The smell made her heart beat about her breast.

Really, how can Granny keep such unreliable flowers in the Conservatory?

"Miss," said Robin, and his cap was in his hand.

For no reason at all, and without any warning, suddenly Flute felt impatient. Why on

161

earth the boy wanted to keep “Miss”-ing her?

Granny’s granddaughter tossed her head.

“Oh! Don’t trouble,” muttered Flute.

Robin was troubling a good deal, at the moment, but only over a silly chrysanthemum.

“They’ve done well, haven’t they?” said Flute defiantly.

“Flowers do, in here,” said Robin.

And, needlessly, no more.

His heavy footsteps echoed away down the mosaic aisle between the flowers.

Flute struggled with pungent feelings.

The feelings wouldn’t let her sit down on any one of the Conservatory chairs.

They trotted her off to see those small rough white chrysanthemums, down there....

“I like these best,” said Flute.

Certainly they were dear, gentle little things. So friendly, eyeing her so sympathetically. Flowers they were, not overcurled mops, ready to sweep simple consideration away.

“Yes,” said Robin. “They are really the outdoor ones. The hardy fellows, that aren’t afraid.”

“Afraid ...”

“Oh! Just of the wind and rain, and frost, and rather unsheltered places....”

The Conservatory would have been silent

162

if it hadn’t been for the scent of the flowers. Strongly it swirled and rose, strong and stronger. It curled round Flute and Robin, and filled all the space between them.

Visible it was, as mist. Was that the reason Flute could only see Robin as a person rather far away?

Far away?

“You—are not going to be here long, are you?”

“No, I don’t think so, Miss.”

“Aren’t you going—somewhere, right off, America, is it? Or Australia?”

Robin smiled.

“Trinidad. You see, I’ve been lucky. Passed a test. I’ve got the promise of a job out there, on botanical research work. I’ve been very lucky. It may lead to anything.”

Robin was looking away at the flowers.

The interview, this moment, between moments was closing in.

Behind the flowers Flute suddenly noticed the tracery of frost on the Conservatory windows.

Wide, fantastic designs of fancied flowers and fruits—or maps of countries she had never dreamed.

Right away there, behind the chrysanthemums.

163

How far everything was!

Nothing near but the feel of silken strands over her own heart.

He would forget, of course. Why! He had forgotten, already. And, anyway, there was nothing to remember.

Nothing....

How Flute hated the word. It sounded to her like a password. A key-word to something.

He was looking away.

He must look back.

Gardeners must ... servants, to be commanded.

“He is a servant,” a voice inside Flute insisted. “Of course, a servant. Only a servant. Why should he dare look the captain of his own soul? A secret king of secret places? Speak to him. Speak sharply to him ... that is your right.”

Aloud, Flute said, to a chrysanthemum, “You’ll be sorry—to go—so far?”

Robin said, “To leave my Father and Mother—not to be able to see Miss Jane ... in case there might be something I could do for her. I’d do anything for Miss Jane.”

Oh! He would, would he ... for Miss Jane.

“But for nothing else,” Robin went on.

164

“It’s as well not to stay round about. To move over the world. Not to have time to—not to get, well, ideas, out of one’s beat.” He might just as well have said “station.” Because he was only trying to mock her. To make fun of her little life, her tiny trinket affairs.

He was laughing at the person who once told him she would rather have a Doll than anything in the world.

Flute swung round, her chestnut hair-points twisting about like weathercocks.

Why had she ever noticed him?

Imagined his sympathy? Accepted that solitary, grey note of his? Contentedly taken back Cob from his arms?

* * * * *

“Well! What’s done can’t be undone.”

Cob the Clown, perhaps, from his hiding-place in her stocking drawer, upstairs....

* * * * *

Well, then! Why did he want to look ...

Why did he want to stop looking ... like that ... just as Flute turned back again?

Robin had turned to pick up his basket. Just as gracefully and easily as he had walked into her Lilliput world, Robin was going to walk out of it....

Robin ...

165

“Robert! Is that Robert, there? Ah! I thought as much. I’ve been waiting about for half an hour for you, Robert. And should never have found you then if Miss Fl——Airs. Whayman hadn’t been careless enough to leave both the drawing-room and the Conservatory doors open. I wonder when I shall be able to teach you sense, Flute? About the same time as I get Robert Simmons to understand that I will not have Jane’s Simmons’s ways put above my Whimpey’s, I suppose.”

* * * * *

Granny had fallen asleep by the fire.

She had done it quite suddenly, in the middle of a spirited conversation with her absurd, although easily settled audience on the subject of Aunt Jane’s health.

One minute Granny had been saying:

“And what I say is, Jane never was. Strong, I should say, strong enough, I mean, to be ready for anything. Of course Jane was never one to hearten up other people, always too much of the Let-the-Lord’s-Will-alone-or-else-you’ll-be-the-loser sort of feeling about her, although naturally I say it in all kindness. However, that’s neither here nor there now. Here we are, no doubt you agree with me and your poor Aunt Jane, not nearly as expected. I should say, as to be hoped, I should say ...”

166

And the next minute Granny was asleep. Her head bending forward, then jerked back, almost as though Granny had caught herself out in the act of bowing to a being she didn’t believe in.

Flute and Granny were sitting by the fire-place at the more familiar end of the long drawing-room. The fire had grown so fierce over its soft coal and yielding logs, no wonder its warmth had wooed Granny so successfully.

Flute, opposite her, curled in a deep arm-chair, watched the drawing-room, attentive to the little sighs and whispers, with which it yielded to the fire.

Every now and then Flute jerked her own head up ... had she, too, been asleep, or were the last, lost few minutes only to be laid to the fire’s account?

Flute stared into the fire, as into the eyes of a friend. Every day changing, every day the glowing same. Ever wooed, ever welcome, the golden element, cruellest and dearest to man. Along a crumbling log ran a petulance of tiny flames.

Dying, the log budded with phoenix-flowers. Dying, it sent out whispers like the notes of a song some tree might have swayed to, in some past summer.

167

Outside Willow Hall the great elms stood sentinel and sheltering.

Here, in the drawing-room, the last of some tree went down in ashes for the warmth of man ... and, as it went, sent up one great shadow, that covered Granny like a pall, quivered and vanished over the drawing-room wall.

When that log had dropped out in hot dust between the bars, Flute looked again at the fire, and found it was a garden.

All over its fuel, flowers were coming up. Great roses, a tiny crocus, even a little blue gentian, made merry here and there about it.

Her eyes drifting off, down the drawing-room, Flute saw roses from the fire coming up everywhere.

A large one, in the middle of that cabinet, then a crocus flickering from a chair-leg.

The fire, planting out its flowers everywhere.

A sudden flash from a lost, unlighted chandelier crossed the drawing-room like summer lightning.

“I wonder,” drowsed Flute, “is all the world a garden, really, only nobody ever knows it? I wonder—are all the people who know how to deal with it, really gardeners?”

168

“I wonder, are gardeners...?...

* * * * *

Not only Granny had fallen asleep.

169

Chapter Nine

NEW YEAR and its Eve were neglected festivals in Withy. Like Flute's birthday, there was about them a bumptious air of being a little too ready to expect presents all over again.

Still, Granny spared the last old year's day a sigh or so, and at ten o'clock invited the retiring Flute to listen for the Midnight Peal.

Granny, having done her duty by the departing months, went to bed and to sleep, ignoring everything but her determination to behave exactly as she pleased, year come, year go.

Always, Flute had managed a mild imitation of Granny.

Gone to bed and slept what had been into what was going to be.

Waking, the next morning, to no change noted....

But this year, Flute left the drawing-room fire for the frostiness of her bedroom, and stared about it as though in search of ... What?

There was nothing at all, of course, except nip enough in the air to hurry the most languid inside the sheets.

Flute, extinguishing the gas, lighting a candle, pattered, quick as a shadow, about the floor. Over to the wardrobe, first to fetch Cob. Cob hid by day, decorated by night.

Every night, Flute brought him out of a sheltering stocking drawer, and disposed him on the edge of the mantelpiece.

Here, Cob looked remarkably well. He swung his legs entirely at ease, and gave no sign of discontent at no more mantelpiece or box-room by day.

A philosopher, Cob, and, doubtless, one quite ready to believe that the space permitted to fantasy in this world is often just the confines of a stocking drawer.

Flute had got into the way of talking to Cob.

"Never mind, Cob," Flute would say, after minding something, rather acutely, herself. "Least said, Cob, soonest mended." And Cob, whose torn frill had received no attention, bowed very agreeably, and went on awaiting the next favour.

To-night, Flute, with Cob in her arms, unexpectedly encountered the looking-glass.

...A child she saw there.
Such a child. Wide-eyed. Hugging a parti-coloured clown ...
That babyish nightdress ... could it ever have been chosen as part of a
trousseau?

What a small, lost child! ...
A wave of something slapped against Flute's heart.
She clung to Cob, that obliging spar.
Why must she be forced to fall between two facts?
The fact of childishness, the fact of Edward.
Here a widow in borrowed funeral plumes.
There a child, quite content with a doll.
Flute scrambled into bed, taking Cob with her. She hugged him tight, but
could squeeze no answer out of that soft body.
Flute lay, staring, waiting on the hours. A sob stuck in her throat.
She felt as though, in about one minute, she was going to understand
something.

The hours slid by. There was a stir about the world....
Flute sat up in bed.
It was moonlight.
The moon had come through the clouds just as easily as a comforting
thought through sadness. It was gentle and gold, over the silver-black
world. It hung in the Heavens,

171

low enough to drop down, at any minute, to light some affair of earth.

The moon, looking so mild. The earth below it, so attentive. Everything
was waiting. Very still, but keeping a quiver in the air.

The moon, very friendly.

Flute jumped out of bed into the icy shadow of her bedroom floor. She
still hugged Cob, and ran across to the window, dragging the eiderdown
from her bed.

The moon-window owned a high-set window-seat. Flute arranged the
eiderdown on it, Eke a nest, and tucked up herself and Cob, leaving only
chestnut hair-points, and a bell, tipping a cap-peak, to suffer the cold.

Nice ... up here ... on the window-seat.

Ah! The air was almost shaking now....

With a throb and a thudding out burst the bells. The Midnight Peal,
protesting, protesting....

Why? Against what...?

There it was, again and again.

And between each peal, its ghost ... the shadow of the Muffled Peal....

All round Flute the world clashed and echoed. It was not only the bells, it was the earth itself. The roaring of the elms

172

of the garden were in it. The silver whisper of the willows, beside the river down below. The hiss of sleet, the dripping of rain. The wind that sighs, shudders, and is gone.

Everything forgotten in last year's seasons came out into the moonlight and cried to Heaven with the bells.

How could the garden keep so still?

Why didn't this pealing act as a great wind among the elm-branches?

How did the trees do it ... preserve the placid elegance of their lacy boughs against the sky? ... And by to-morrow morning it would all be forgotten.

The dawn would come up as unconcerned as a kitchenmaid.

A garden-boy, whistling, under the trees would receive as much attention from them as all this rending, terrifying splendour of sound.

Oh! There it was again. And louder, surely.

Oh! In one minute ghosts would come out to tread the measure of the Muffled Peal.

Flute gripped wildly at the window-ledge. A flop beside her meant Cob, fallen to the floor. The sob, that had been so long in her throat, broke, unheard, during the loudest clash of all.

173

"I'm afraid," sobbed Flute, "afraid of everything ... nothing ..."

She felt the forces of the world go round her. And into those forces her own finger had found a way.... A careless child, she had fumbled at the greatest ...

For after all, had she refused to marry Edward?

Edward. Had she ever really thought of Edward before? No. Not once.

She had slunk away from the idea of him. Had turned her head. Turned it back with relief when Edward was no more to be seen. She hadn't cared, she had only avoided.

Not once had she considered Edward as a creature, like herself, to suffer, to expect, to puzzle, to wish.

Edward had gone to his death like a caricature. She had been glad to turn the page that displayed him.

There had been a few real things about Edward. Kindness, anxiety, hopes of happiness.... And Flute had never refused to marry him....

Accepted, like a woman, slid away from her acceptance, like a child.

Mum, and Dad, Granny, her world, all had forced her?

174

To the naked question being set before her by the bells, that was no answer....

The waves of the world were breaking all round her.

The world, itself, breaking, too.

A small, lost child.

She had been. But was she?

“Now, now,” cried the bells, “and you are awake to hear us. There is that in your heart that cannot, any longer, slumber or sleep. You have pulled the coverlet of childhood up about you, quite long enough. Throw it aside. Step out into the world. Your inheritance is here.

“It is sadness, suffering, understanding when the need for understanding is no more. Love, when no lover is near. Regret for dead fires. Fear of living ones. The fumbling of your fingers because a lock will not yield. The fumbling of your fingers because it will never close again.

“Oh! yes. Here is all life for you, begun to a funeral march. Covered in a shadow. Do you think to slink out of the shadow, just because you didn’t care? Now, here, and now!”

“The Year is Dead! Long live the Year!”

And the bells went on.

Now Flute knew they would never end. Clash out their question for ever and ever.

175

Flute shivered as the cold of the Old Year met the chill of the New.

She was between two worlds, where an end is not so terrible as a beginning.

“And I never understood,” sobbed Flute, “there was no one to help me, and I never knew what I was doing.”

She was rocking to and fro, in the eiderdown, crying like a child. Tears ran across each other down her face, and fell, to mark the pale silk of the eiderdown with black pearls, of very assorted sizes.

Rocking about, Flute hit her head against the lintel.

With a last sob, she stayed still.

And so did the bells.

The midnight airs still stung and shivered with the sound of them, but now the sound was an echo, and at any minute an echo may die away.

Flute stared into the mooncalm of the garden. The impossible radiant world where shadows paint trees upon the grass, where the grass itself is nothing but a diamanté robe, trailed there by the moon.

Now nothing seemed to be happening anywhere. All the clashing and protest stilled, and the world, only a well-set scene for an imaginary masquerade.

176

The garden, a pretty picture cut out of velvet and tinsel.

Why! After all, if the world is nothing but that, why should one fancy, distressing questions, worry oneself about its ways?

Flute closed her eyes against the cool glass. She opened them slowly to see the garden once again, before going back to bed....

Just opposite Flute rose up two great elms. Such shadows attended their trunks, in the moonlight, that trunks and shadows together rose to Heaven as vast twin pillars, solid enough to support all the sky. The topmost boughs enlaced overhead. Underneath these boughs a view was set, a tiny silver trinket scene, to-night.

Against it a velvet strip moved to and fro.

A strip like a sentinel on guard.

Pacing from elm-trunk to elm-trunk, pausing at each and turning.

Flute watched it. She pushed up the window a little. The echo of the bells had passed away over the tree-tops. Now the only sound was a slight hissing of disturbed gravel.

Yes. It was a real figure, a man's, that sentinel strip. It went on with its grave pacing.

Flute could see the graceful, measured walk, distinctly....

177

Robin walked slowly into the middle of the space between the elm-trunks, and stood facing the house.

He was bareheaded, his face turned up, a glint of white above the silvered, sparkling gravel path.

All the measured ease had gone out of his body, suddenly.

Flute could see that he had raised clenched hands close to his head. With his fists against his ears, as though he were trying to shut out some dreaded sound, his white face turned up like that, standing so very stiff and still, Flute had to stare, holding her breath, to be sure that it was indeed Robin.

Flute stared. Just stared. Felt nothing.

Then a violent thudding against the eider-down.

Had it anything to do with her?

Nothing else could account for it.... Why, it was the thudding of her own heart.... That was it....

That was all. There was nothing else. Nothing but the moonlight. The trees radiant, beyond the radiance of spring or summer. Velvet shadows for ease. A tiny silver view. A tall, slender silhouette stiffened suddenly under the boughs. And a thudding that somehow went on.

178

That was all.

Why did it seem so much?

How could it sound like the answer to a question...?

* * * * *

Robin had not moved. He still stood there, staring up at Flute's bedroom window.

Flute caught her breath.

"He'll be cold. Frozen. I must go. If I do, he will, I feel it, and then perhaps he won't catch cold."

Flute slid down from the window-ledge. Her toe met Cob's cap. She picked Cob up absently.

"I wonder," murmured Flute—"I wonder what it was he was so afraid of hearing...?"

Close under Flute's arm, Cob, with an agreeable bow, leant forward to listen to that thudding of Flute's heart.

179

Chapter Ten

IT appeared to be true. Aunt Jane was not well. Only one single visit to church on Christmas Day was run up the flagstaff of Granny's conversation like a warning signal.

"I've never known such a thing before, or perhaps I should say only once before, Flute. And that was when your Aunt Jane was sixteen with the measles. Nasty things, and they would come out and show. How well I remember that Sunday, and your poor Aunt Jane, in the heavy veil she borrowed from Mamma. But she was so very flushed with the rash, I'm afraid everyone noticed it, right through the veil. At any rate, she was shivering dreadfully all through morning service. And she did own her head ached. Why, after lunch she went to lie down. We never did that, of course, and I remember so well Papa saying he supposed, if Jane started that kind of thing, the next generation would never want to get up at all. He said so to Jane, at tea, and do you know, actually the funny girl burst out crying."

"However, next day the doctor came, and said it was measles, and then we weren't surprised. I suppose I had them, too, as in those days, Jane and I slept together. However, I've forgotten all about it long ago."

"Mine cannot have been so noticeable, anyway, as the rash didn't start on Sunday."

"That was the first time Jane missed an evening service. I recall it all like yesterday, and dear Mamma, who always walked with Jane, so vexed, going on by herself in front."

180

Granny, speaking very earnestly, quite shouted at Flute. Granny always had the shouting excuse of the size of her dining-room table.

Of course, for Christmas, every spare leaf had been added to it, and Granny felt rather unwilling to let them go again. So she sat behind a quantity of handsome hall-marked utensils, and issued remarks to Flute that had a considerable distance to travel, but lost none of their decision *en route*.

"Well!" exclaimed Granny, at last, "I suppose the end of all this only means that I shall have to make a point of going down to see Jane. How I'm to manage it, of course, well, goodness only knows, and if that didn't

sound like blaming Providence, upon my word I should be tempted to say that Goodness doesn't care."

"However, Flute, I hope you will never have to hear your Grandmother speak in any such way as that. Still, nothing will stop me saying that I'm sure I hope Providence sees fit to spare me a few minutes to visit Jane, for how I can manage them, singlehanded, with all my poor old women ill after Christmas, and this trying business about the upset with my Ladies' Charitable Committee, and not one of them on speaking terms with another, perhaps, Flute, you can tell me?"

181

"If there are no Mutton Dinners this year, I, for one, shall not be surprised.

"I cannot understand people who have to do with the Poor. They never seem to think of the unfortunate creatures; it's all Does Mrs. Middleman sit above Mrs. Jordan, and, if so, why, when Mrs. Jordan gave five and six, and Mrs. Middleman the five, without, until she got wind of Mrs. Jordan's sixpence?"

"I'm sure I do what I can. I never take the slightest notice. But it takes all my time, and, with no wish to complain, I must say it would have made things easier if only your Aunt Jane could have waited for this affair of hers, until, say, nearer the end of March."

At last it was settled that Flute should go down to Aunt Jane's, by herself.

And carry a basket, with a little dried thyme in it.

"What for, I confess, Flute, I hardly know. But your poor Aunt has never done asking me if I have any put by. Twice, at least, she has done so, since September. She uses it for something. I never know what. Of course, you could quite easily carry it without a basket, but perhaps the basket will put your Aunt Jane in mind of that fourpence she owes me for the hamper of apples I had to pay carriage on, to go down to her, last

182

week. I told the boy Nonsense. I am not in the habit of being spoken to about carriage. Carriage, indeed. I've been meaning to mention it to your Aunt Jane for sometime. You need not say that I gave the boy sixpence for himself."

"That has nothing at all to do with it."

“The gist of the matter is that fourpence is what your Aunt owes me.”

“And I quite intend to have it. My accounts give me trouble enough as it is.”

“I don’t want a ‘Fourpence owed by Jane’ staring at me from the bottom of every page each time I go to the wretched things.”

The sun was trying to come into the dining-room. A meek, pale sun, scared of colour, sidling round Granny’s tossing head, as deprecating of advance as any of the Poor. But the sun grew either bold or brave.

At any rate, it tried to throw Flute’s shadow on to the wall opposite her, and, with weak gallantry, traced a giant finger for Granny’s small, admonitory one.

If Granny had not been too busy to notice, the sun’s own fingers were all over her silver teapot....

But Granny was more than occupied settling Flute firmly into the day.

“And, bless me, child, I believe you’ll be

183

saying it’s your birthday! It is? Ah! Well! I thought that was yesterday. And never thinking much of a birthday just after Christmas I was going to wait till next week to give you a little present. However, I suppose, now all this has happened, you may as well have it to-day. Not till after lunch, mind; I shall not be able to attend to anything that isn’t important until then. You can remind me if you like, when you come to my room for Aunt Jane’s thyme and the basket.”

* * * * *

Flute opened the garden door, with her hat thrust into a basket, along with Aunt Jane’s thyme. This was daring.

Granny, who approved it less and less, might see her bare head out of the dining-room window, where she was closeted with a Charitable Lady of doleful accent, and a permanent sniff of injury.

The pale, bright airs of Flute’s twentieth birthday greeted her like a challenge.

Flute, brave as a robin, startled the garden with quite a reckless whistle.

The whistle came back.

A robin flew, up from nowhere, to Flute.

But the answering whistle was not his.

Round the corner of the path, behind some solid low bushes, came a sound of digging.

184

Steadily, heavily, clod-muffled, a spade repeated its thick note again and again.

The robin flew round the bushes after the sound.

Flute followed.

A wheelbarrow blocked the path. Beside it wide laurel leaves spotted and shivered over some secret.

With a sigh and several hisses they gave up the secret. Robin straightened his back from his spade, and came out of the bushes.

He stood in the path beside the wheelbarrow, and looked at Flute without a smile.

He took off his cap, put his hand over his eyes. No smile was in them, and they could hardly have been dazzled by the pale New Year's sun.

Flute stood still, blocked by the wheelbarrow.

Her heart was thudding again.

Her birthday airs quickened about her.

They starred the day into a festival.

They were bright as banners before her eyes.

The thudding in her breast was only like a bell. A conquering throb. A muffled peal, ringing for the captain of a soul.

Flute stood there, quite straight in the sunshine. She wasn't afraid, anyhow, any more.

185

Of herself, her surroundings, any question, any answer.

The New Year was hers. She was born again. She had just rubbed her eyes, and it had happened.

There was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all. Perhaps Edward had died that she might feel like this.

"Robin," said Flute, "I meant to come and find you."

Robin dropped his spade. Before that, he gave a start.

"Robin," said Flute steadily, "did you expect me?"

Robin had no answer, but a stoop after his spade.

"You whistled to me, you know, Robin. Didn't you expect me?"

Robin had his spade again, but no smile yet, in his eyes. He looked at Flute as though he could not see her. As though something was between them, dark in the sunshine, and never to be lightened.

He stood there, so tall and slim. So supple and easy of grace, his head bent a little. His clothes rough and stained. His neck bare, his arms, young and nervous with strength.

There was garden mould all over his hands.

186

But his long, thin fingers gripped the edge of the wheelbarrow until they were white.

He was shaking a little, or was it the winter wind, risen to quiver over his shoulders?

He did not look up, only struck his palms together to free them from the garden grime.

“Why did you come?” he muttered to his striking palms. “Why did you ever come—near me?”

Flute came closer.

Only a splintered sunray was between them.

“I came——” said Flute. Then all her words went away.

She saw him as she had seen him first. Advancing, smiling, gently considering little things.

She saw the toys he had waited upon.

His friendly air in that Lilliput Land.

She saw herself beside him.

Heard their first words again.

Remembered those little silly signs they had made each other to show that they had met. Heard him extol Dolls. Speak of absurd toys as Queens, remote from him....

Oh! What could you do with a man like that? ... Only one thing ... say:

“I knew directly I saw you ... you gave me all I ever cared for of Cob.... It wasn’t only a toy you gave me ... was it everything

187

you had? And I took it. Yes. Took it to keep.... I will keep it, too. I’ll never give it up. Cob is mine twice over. You gave him to me again. How did you guess they had taken him away?”

“How did you always just guess everything?”

“How could you come, like a fairy prince, and turn into Granny’s gardener just to tease me? I don’t believe any of it. You are royal. As royal as I am. As royal as we both are, because we are lovers....”

She was in his arms.

She had always known she would be.

She had always known he would kiss like this.

And that the whole world would wait upon them. The sun only set in the sky, to fit them out with gold....

He need never inquire for a friendly Doll again.

They would never need Cob any more, to point his bow from Flute’s heart to Robin’s.

They needed nothing but themselves.

Here—Together. Since the world began. For ever.

* * * * *

The sun was as gold as a Fairy King’s ransom. A celestial body in waiting upon them. It dared not go in.

188

They gave each other everything in the world. First bliss, First anguish. Kisses, crueller than joy. Gentleness, too sharp to be a stab through the heart.

Belief, love’s mockery, faith, desire, the divine doubt of a kiss, too sweet to be matched by any lips again.

“You cannot love me as I love you.”

Ah! Forget words. There is nothing here but kisses, and their shadows—sighs....

“You have given me happiness. And how it hurts. Give it again, or else I shall die. You have made a woman out of a child, and just because, first of all, you smiled at her toys. Stopped to consider tiny trinket affairs, and so bewitched them into the greatest jewel of all.

“Robin! Robin! I’ve forgotten every word in the world but one.”

* * * * *

Round the solid, low laurel bushes, the robin, tired of waiting on two people without a single crumb between them, flew away.

* * * * *

189

Chapter Eleven

IT was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened, and so, of course, it was perfectly true.

And so, of course, Flute couldn't believe it. Could only stand beside the wheelbarrow, with Robin's arm loosely about her, and Robin's white face and dark eyes so near hers.

Robin was muttering. Something unhappy. It sounded like "I should never ... How could I ... how did I ..."

Flute was braver than her birthday morning. She had in her heart all the courage of the world, and, over her head, the amazing blue and gold banner of the sky. What else can one ask, when one has only known Love for ten minutes?

"And, fancy! I was afraid of understanding! And I didn't know how, and I didn't know this!" chanted Flute to her heart.

She was so wise. There was rather less than nothing that she did not know.

She was so much older than Robin, really it was quite absurd.

Robin's unhappy look was delightful. Of course, he needed reassuring.

"What do you say? Only a gardener? Not a gentleman? Oh! Robin, what do you

190

think I'm going to do about it? Guess! Why I shall ask Aunt Jane!"

She had only said it to tease and torment, because torment's comforting was so enchanting.

But Robin turned away, his arm dropped, hitting his knuckles harshly against the side of the wheelbarrow.

"You're not to hurt yourself!" Flute stabbed at him.

It was too lovely, this fury, she felt. Like scolding Cob for bowing, absurdly, and finding he had bowed over a gift of gold. Robin was hers. Hers to command.

A servant? Why, of course, a servant. A servant by the sign of that tender agony in his dark eyes.

Flute was a mistress. A mistress, indeed. Hers to command this heart that would obey before her wish was uttered.

It was all a fairy tale. Quite impossible. Too impossible not to be believed.

How many times had Flute spoken to Robin?

What did she know of him, beyond the music of his touch upon her heart-strings?

He was Granny's gardener, at most impressive, Aunt Jane's protégé.

Do people love gardeners? Embrace them beside wheelbarrows?

191

Oh! Ask Juliet, whether it was his well-bred blood that enticed her to Romeo.

Inquire of Iseult, how deeply she was attracted by Tristram's pedigree.

The Lady of Shalott, we know, died, for really the most absurd of reasons.

And look at Othello's complexion. Did Desdemona paint her heart rose by that?

Not that Flute troubled her own slight historical recollections this morning.

She had so many other matters of interest, higher in heart and nearer in moment.

The first thing to do was to bring back Robin's smile. He had lost it. Perhaps the robin had flown away with it. So Flute coaxed her lips into a whistle. The robin might take warning. At any rate her Robin would see....

She was close beside his heart. It was thumping most terribly.

Robin was sitting on the wheelbarrow handle, and had dragged Flute into his arms.

Really he was rough. Rubbing his hand over and over her head, as though daring his touch to persuade him she was real.

"Lovely," muttered Robin. "Loveliest. Flute."

So there was music everywhere. The whole world, singing. Flute's heart and name.

192

Robin's voice, breaking with rapture.

The other robin back to try his song again.

The music was mounting beyond everything. The sun was a hymn, and the unseen stars a choir.

Now, there was no more need of words.

Yes. This is the golden moment, for which we live, even if we live in vain.

* * * * *

Flute wasn't happy. She was quite past happiness.

She knew more than everything in the world. Knew how to count the thudding beats of Robin's heart.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nor ever could again. For Flute knew the past, the present, the future.

Understood.

Understood Granny. That she had loved Grandpapa. Understood Mum and Dad and what they never understood. Understood Nurse, who had always nursed a wisdom beyond understanding. Understood Edward, how he had fumbled for her, missed her, missed Life, by chance, and gone.

Understanding her own heart, at last, Flute lay in Robin's arms, happiness weighing down her eyelids.

A tiny shadow went over them, in the sunshine.

193

Again the robin had flown off.

Had the morning gone with him?

Flute moved her head, against Robin's shoulder and put up her hand. Gracious! Feel how rough her hair was!

Robin had tangled its smoothness, rubbed its pointed question marks away.

Life stirred and reproved .

Granny's basket rolled over at Flute's feet.

"I must go," cried Flute, and, caught suddenly by panic, pushed aside Robin's arms, and ran out of them, away.

* * * * *

Going down the drive, facing the gates at the end of it, Flute felt frightened.

Suppose people, out in the road, seeing her, should recognize a queen in her regalia?

It is terrifying to wear a golden robe and a crown, just for the passing of the time of day.

People would be quite certain to stare. No wonder, at a queen with jewels for eyes.

How difficult Life is! And how it only stops its difficulties, long enough, to tangle its gold thread hopelessly in the grey wool skein of everyday.

Flute knew she was dressed all in gold. An embarrassing material for morning wear in a country town.

At any minute she might turn to gold herself.

194

Already, the palms of her hands were primrose when she looked at them in the sunshine.

However, she had avoided Granny, still battling, back there in the dining-room, with the grievous sniff of the inevitably offended.

Only Aunt Jane's, a certain encounter. And Aunt Jane never noticed ...

Flute pushed open Aunt Jane's small gate.

It only needed the slightest of efforts.

Aunt Jane's gate always stood ajar.

Wych-elm House stood, so simply, there near the river. And, in this morning's sunshine, the blue smoke of the town upon the opposite hill-side drifted over to Aunt Jane's chimneys, as if to claim friendship with them.

How wonderfully quiet, all the world, and still!

Only Flute's heart, and Robin's, back there in the garden, to pulse its peace away.

Aunt Jane's house stood, more than still, above tranquillity.

In the distance a lost bell sounded, over and over, one far note of sanctuary.

* * * * *

Miss Jane was reported out in her garden. Yes, round by the new rose-arch. Would Miss Flute (your pardon) like to walk round and see?

Flute, doing so, regretted the disturbance of her foot upon the gravel path.

195

Something about Aunt Jane's still world made any firm movement seem out of place, this morning.

Aunt Jane was standing at the bend of a path, dedicated to her new rose-arch.

Beside her was Simmons, cap in hand, bent attentively over the arch matter.

Flute stared at them, as at figures fashioned in stained glass.

Golden stained glass, peculiar to simple figures of endeavour and victory.

Simmons had rather the attitude of a reaper.

Aunt Jane wore a golf-cape, stiff as a saint's robe.

Aunt Jane was bareheaded. Here in the sunshine, her face looked almost like a face only partly materialized out of the pale air. Blank, remote ...

She turned to Flute, who felt a pale kiss.

This glowing, maddening world.... And Aunt Jane who will never tell ...

"I'm glad to see you, Flute."

Flute was aware of Simmons, not really considering the arch, looking anxiously at Aunt Jane.

"Your grandmother has so little time ..."

"I'm very sorry you've not been well, Aunt Jane."

Aunt Jane was looking past Flute.

196

That strange, secret look was a smile.

"Nothing to trouble about. And soon to pass."

Flute saw Simmons straighten up, slowly. His expression was the only sharp thing in the garden.

"Perhaps you can spare time, Flute, for a turn with me. Up to the new border. You must give me your advice upon it."

Flute could hear, quite distinctly, the distant bell, separating Aunt Jane's words with its far note.

She put up her hand to Aunt Jane's thin arm under the golf-cape.

"That's right," said Aunt Jane, a little nearer.

They walked together, their footsteps hardly disturbing the gravel beneath them.

Flute spoke of the garden, and Aunt Jane quite agreed.

"In the Spring. Next Summer ..."

"Who knows?" said Aunt Jane.

The new border had points all round it, like a radiance. It was designed for warm gold flowers. "Since my garden is always a trifle shady, but that will not trouble me, next Summer," said Aunt Jane.

They were going on to see the young apple trees, when Flute felt Aunt Jane's arm shaking.

"You are tired, aren't you, Aunt Jane?"

We'll go indoors, instead? And then, may I sit with you, just for a little while? Not to keep you, too long ...”

Oh! One couldn't be gentle enough this morning. Tender enough, in a world turned to gold for one's happiness, alone.

To think of what Aunt Jane—every one—had missed was enough to make one's heart ache. Who else had known Robin?

Gone, undoubting, into his arms?

And, besides, the glory of the garden world was too maddening.

Everywhere, the promise of shoots and buds, coming up because someone had cared.

Better, perhaps, to go indoors, and distribute one's heart-beats about repressive furnitures.

Place one's feet upon footstools. Raise one's eyes to ceilings. Pale, paper stars are safer than shivering, shining ones.

The night will be here, quite soon enough.

Oh! For a little smug safety, while it is yet day. And then, perhaps, one might be able to say something....

It didn't feel very possible at present, but out here one's eyes were dazzled, and one's words warmed away.

Speak to Aunt Jane ... but how—of what?

Love. How it is divine?

The future. How it must be?

The present. That nothing can alter?

The pitiable past...?

You cannot talk of moonshine, at least, not with much hope of sympathy from your family.

Aunt Jane was Granny's sister.

Granny and Aunt Jane kept gardeners.

Their granddaughters and great-nieces were born, grew up, married ... but not those gardeners' sons ...

To suggest such a thing to Granny ...

To insinuate it to Aunt Jane ...

And yet—this golden burden ... this perfect glory, born, so radiantly, only since breakfast....

A mésalliance of earth, very possibly, but not of Paradise....

Aunt Jane ... to whom no one had ever spoken, except scrupulously of such things as shrubs.

Some difficulty was here.

Aunt Jane led the way into the drawing-room. It was a large, low room, where no bird ever hung, and the morning sun was unacquainted with it.

It had two fireplaces, inspired by well-stocked overmantels, and a great many massive gold frames round large smooth saints standing on little curly clouds.

199

Aunt Jane looked round the drawing-room door, rather apologetically, before they went in, and Flute walked on tiptoe, and was glad she had remembered to leave the basket in the hall.

"Sit down, Flute," said Aunt Jane.

She patted the sofa, quite close beside her.

Flute sat down, wondering if Aunt Jane really wanted her there.

Aunt Jane was looking away, out of a small green window.

"I'm glad you came, Flute," Aunt Jane repeated.

Flute moved, with a little shiver.

She looked at the smooth braided back of Aunt Jane's head.

Aunt Jane and Granny both wore coiled plaits as in their girlhood.

But after all these years, one was able sometimes to catch sight of the beginning of those plaits, and compare the sudden start of them, with the smooth head-top of which they hoped to appear, the natural end....

No one had ever really spoken to Aunt Jane.

You could not imagine consulting her about anything vigorous, hot and glowing.

Aunt Jane was so cool. Her whole self niched above life. Her heart in some recess. The more Aunt Jane spoke, the more one

200

pictured Aunt Jane's spirit, reposing coldly at the back of some icy cavern.

Bess and Barbara had always tittered about her. The bare idea of Aunt Jane, and any real feeling, the sort real people have!

Flute never remembered feeling anything about Aunt Jane at all.

But, until this moment, had she ever really felt anything?

Flute had just looked on the world through a window. Suddenly the window shivered and split into a thousand quivering colours. It was a kaleidoscope.

The world beyond didn't matter.

And anyway, one could see nothing but the glowing fragments between it and one's own eyes.

Here was magic, the greatest wonder, that comes from nowhere, and that one must, never, never, let go....

Under her coat, Flute put her hand to her heart. Some hot ruby atoms were lodged there, throbbing.

Ah! If one could only share a smile over them with Aunt Jane!

Flute had the golden touch, this morning. She longed to lay the primrose palms of her sunlit hands over everything, every one, cold and lonely.

And, about Aunt Jane ... what was there

201

of mystery? She was chill and quiet. Might she possibly be waiting? Waiting, alone at Wych-elms, for ... life she had never known...?

* * * * *

No one wants to be cold and lonely.

No one wants silence, empty rooms, nothing.

Every one wants love, a little laughter, just movement enough to smile with.

Flute had so much, this morning. She was so rich. What could she give to this poor person, Aunt Jane? ...

"Aunt Jane," Flute was beginning. In a fluster, she had an idea she must have said "Robin" instead.

Of course there was only one word in the world to-day, but whatever would Aunt Jane think...?

The drawing-room was quite still. Aunt Jane's head turned away.

Perhaps Flute had not said "Robin" after all.

"I wish you weren't ill," began Flute. Aunt Jane's attention came back to the sofa. So, perhaps, after all ...

"Don't worry about me, Flute. Tell your Grandmother not to distress herself. There is no need of it. Only be sorry for people who suffer. Be sorry for people who suffer in spirit. And silence. You know what people say—

‘suffer in silence.’ Such an odd expression. How can one suffer in silence? Silence is beautiful. Flute, it’s peace, and grace of time. The one thing to take away pain.”

It was terrible to hear Aunt Jane talk like this. Terrible.

Because it meant that she was lonely, and had never known how, where lovers meet, their hearts provoke the echoes, and no silence can be.

Flute said “Robin” again. She was sure she did. Out loud. Without caring. What did anything matter, but a little warmth, wizarded in here, where everything was so chill?

If Aunt Jane heard her, she took no notice. Passionately, Flute wished she would. Flute wished everything passionately to-day. If only I could warm Aunt Jane!

Flute put out her hand, and took one of those on Aunt Jane’s lap. She pressed it a little, trying not to notice a sharp diamond prick.

Aunt Jane left her hand in Flute’s, and still looked out of the green window.

“How warm you are, Flute! How very nice and warm! You must have a splendid circulation, and that is a very good thing. No one likes to be cold. I have always suffered from slight chilliness, since girlhood. Now your Grandmother, I know, was quite the

other way. And yet, somehow, your Grandmother seemed colder than I did. No, I don’t suppose I really mean colder. Perhaps harder. But I fear I’m getting just a very little mixed. For I was thinking more of the spirit than the body.

“Your dear Grandmother is firm. She always knows what she feels, and she is always able to keep on feeling it. That is an advantage, Flute, in this world. A change of heart is apt to be fluttering. One gets put about, hardly knowing what one is at. So often I have experienced that.”

Aunt Jane leant forward, still looking away.

“I know very little of the world, Flute. Only a trifle more than people can tell me. But, as a single woman, I have been obliged to look after my own affairs, and that has taught me a sense of values. Real values. What is worth everything, pain, clinging, endurance, and what is hardly worth throwing away.”

“You are young, Flute. (Twenty to-day, isn’t it? Don’t forget, I have a little present for you, upstairs....) Now you are young, you are at your choosing age. And that goes so quickly, almost before you know it is there. Choose the right thing, Flute, and keep it carefully.... Now, I’m not trying to suggest anything unsuitable ... but, Flute ... don’t

204

let other people take your real choice away.... Remember, people mean well, and most of them kindly ... but so many of them collect things as they go along. Everything in reach.... And it is hard to keep one’s heart’s desire out of reach of everybody.... Flute, when happiness comes, try to recognize it, be sure to believe it. Don’t say, ‘It can’t be.... Joy never could be dressed like this....’

“Joy comes queerly, quite often ... but, don’t make any mistakes ... Flute ...

“Flute, was that a footstep, outside, on the path...?”

“I thought I heard.... But no matter. Only I was rather expecting him. Only just to bring down some plants from your Grandmother’s garden. What was I saying, Flute? Ah! Well! It doesn’t matter.”

Aunt Jane had retired again into her recess. Her spirit gone back into its secret cavern. All around her the drawing-room grew dark, for the sun it had not known was going in.

And Flute must go, too, leaving Aunt Jane to this.

* * * * *

Out in the hall, Aunt Jane seemed to be smiling. She said Good-bye to Flute three times, and three times called her back again.

At the gate, Aunt Jane spoke of going just

205

once more round the garden. But, after all, a wind had risen, cold enough to blow her decision about again.

The last time Flute said Good-bye, Aunt Jane never answered.

She was looking very attentively into the winter jessamine, and Flute could not be certain if she noticed the words at all.

* * * * *

All over the town of Withy, bells and factory whistles were busy.

Flute would be late for lunch, unless she ran most of the way. So Flute ran with her hand pressed to her heart. It was uphill all the way to Willow Hall, but the effort of running made her glow and catch her breath.

The front door was open, Flute could see that through the trees, and Granny, demanding some satisfaction, standing, without any wrap, outside it.

“Upon my word, Flute, what a way to come up the drive! Running and panting like that!”

“Puff! Puff! That’s a nice thing for your Grandmother to catch you at.”

“And where on earth have you been? Not bothering your poor Aunt Jane all the morning? Well, I never! As soon as I take my eyes off anyone, it really seems to me that everything gets past belief.”

206

“Here I’ve been calling all over the house for you. I rang the outside bell, too, just what I didn’t want to do, because it takes the men from their work, and means a lot of ‘Yes, ’M’s,’ and ‘No, ’M’s’ going on, with precious little to show for it.”

“However, there seemed to be no help for it. Ever since the bells went at twelve o’clock, I’ve been expecting you.”

“Here’s a telegram come from your Cousin Bess. She sent it from some outlandish-sounding place in Cornwall.... What on earth is she doing there, when she ought to be at home, so soon after Christmas-time...?”

“Anyway, it seems she wants to spend a week here on her way back to Town.”

“I’m sure I’m always delighted to see one of my Henry’s daughters, but why she can’t wait long enough to write a proper letter, I should like to know?

“A lot of good girls get from education in days like these. In my time no one cared to send a telegram. In fact, I do not remember them at all.”

“And a really nice letter, with the pages neatly crossed, and pretty capital letters, showed people that if parents cared to spend money on their daughters’ schooling, at least there was a little satisfaction to be got for it.”

207

Chapter Twelve

GRANNY took a good deal of pride in her proper feelings for her granddaughters.

She always declared she made no favourites among them, adding that one naturally felt a little differently for one's namesake.

The only grandchild Granny really liked about her was Flute.

Flute, having the least of her Grandmother's spirit, made, by far, the most pleasant companion. But Granny was not going to allow such a tiring to anybody.

There was no air of professional importance about Flute. A dreamy little thing, who could never manage a matter-of-fact Bo to the most gullible goose.

Now Bess and Barbara were smart and spirited. They very seldom attended Granny, and so enjoyed all the favour their constant presence would have destroyed at once.

Their father, Henry, was Granny's eldest son.

He was wealthy and indifferent to everything in the world except his own family and his own affairs.

His daughters took after him. They cared for no concerns but their own.

Granny spoke of their wealth and importance

208

with pride, but sometimes she paused afterwards, long enough to sigh, although not to count up how long it was since she had heard from any of them.

Granny professed quite an admiration for Bess, her namesake.

Bess had black hair and eyes, and rosy cheeks, and looked, said Granny, as a jolly sort of girl should.

Granny saw so little of her that the legend of Bess was never tarnished.

Bess, at twenty-five, was always busy, travelling abroad, going to balls, giving pleasure to her father, improving herself generally ... Granny was sure of it.

And now Bess was coming to stay.

Granny filled Willow Hall with preparation.

You could not enter a single room without hearing the echo of a sharply shut door.

She explained all her feelings about Bess to Flute, and spent a whole morning, as well as the housemaid's and between-maid's time, in deciding not to change the best single spare-room's winter curtains.

"Not that I don't want Bess to feel herself welcome. But, past Christmas as we are, it seems a pity to start fresh rep curtains, when, dear me, a month or two and it will be quite time to think about the muslin ones. However,

209

I've put out the better eiderdown. Not the one I had re-covered last, because I'm still keeping that in case Henry comes."

"But, really, Flute, I'm rather upset, for I find that one of the pair of green vases has a chip at the back. The first time I've seen it. 'Dear me, Annie,' I said, 'what is it that makes you be so careless?' She didn't seem to know. Do these modern maids know anything? And when I think of her Aunt who was with me long ago, and such a nice-minded girl then. How well I recollect her having hysterics, that lasted all one morning, because your Grandfather found her with a teacup in one hand and its handle in the other."

"Poor Lucy thought your dear Grandfather would think she had done it herself."

"I wonder if we shall ever have maids like that again?"

Flute tried to wear a welcoming air about Bess's visit. She started off on all the errands Granny determined, and came back obediently, as Granny remembered each one to be useless after all.

So willing was Flute that, at last, Granny began to look dissatisfied.

There is not quite the same pleasure to be taken in sending people about one's own business,

210

if they look as though asking nothing better.

However, just as the dusk started to weave its spells about the trees, Granny found some satisfaction in discovering her pair of green vases empty, and not a soul who had reminded her that Bess would like to find a few flowers in her bedroom.

"Take a basket, do, Flute, for goodness' sake, and run out and see if you can find Jim, or that boy Robert, only I suppose he's gone by now. Not

many flowers, Flute. These vases won't hold more than four daisies at most. Tscha! Tscha! And now, of course, there are no daisies at this time of year. Well! ask Robert about the chrysanthemums. Not the best ones, of course."

"Just three of the little white ones. No buds, please, we must be careful of what we've got, especially at this time of year."

Flute was off, before Granny had finished saying how, upon her word, Flute didn't seem to understand plain English and the meaning of the word "Hurry."

Flute swung her basket through the secretly groping shadows of the garden.

How wonderful the world was! Even now, with all its gold just an affair of the sky's. Wonderful world, made for dear images. One

211

could fancy the sunset clouds piling up into palaces, rose-stained by some bliss, housed within them.

Flute ran down the dark drive, where, always, a little fear went with her.

Not this evening, though, now her heart was alight, and her feet shod with tiny gilt wings.

How can everything change so easily?

Is plain fact so inflammable that, quite easily, it can glow, phosphorescent with magic?

Out of the great gate, left to clang softly behind her, over the road, and through the woodbelt, went Flute.

She paid the tribute of one small, ardent sigh to the sunset, sighted just beyond, and then ran between the desolate currant bushes, her breath tripping to the measure of her toes.

There was a sound of spading over in one corner. Robin, working late, after all.

Flute thought suddenly of Rip Van Winkle. How he struck the earth, here and there, and raised ghosts wherever he struck.

Robin, perhaps, was raising ghosts—golden ghosts of warm memories of golden Spring flowers, to come.

"Robin," called Flute, over the winter garden.

A quick silence answered her.

212

Flute ran on and turned a currant bush corner, down a little path, lost under a low ferny wall.

“Flute,” said Robin. “Flute. Here. Real.”

“Of course I am.”

“Flute, I thought I had dreamed you.”

“Dream me again.”

He had her in his arms. What was he telling the top of her head?

His words sounded rather wild. And somehow frightened. What is there to fear when lovers meet at last?

Robin kept on, between hot, despairing kisses:

“I’ve no right. Nothing but blame. How dare I do this? Why, Flute, I’m your servant. You know that. For ever. But I’m poor. With all the world to travel. I’m going off in a few weeks now.

“Flute! Flute! Tell me, for God’s sake, how I’m going to leave you? I can’t leave the heart out of my breast; can I? Can I? Do say, Flute. Do tell me. I can’t make anything out, or see anything clearly any more. It’s just like going blind or being dead. Only, it must be quite easy to die. To die, and not know how I love you, any more. And this is so hard. It’s harder than anything anyone

213

has imagined, to love you like this, so near, and know you, so far.”

Flute didn’t listen. What’s the use of listening, anyway? You only hear something you will have to contradict.

There is better business, in a lover’s arms, than contradiction.

And suppose this moment should never come again? Because, of course, it can’t.

This moment is a god’s. And gods are generous when they give of their treasures, once in a lifetime.

Robin, Robin, waste your kisses if you will, but not our precious time.

“Why, of course, you’re not going away.”

“How can I stay?”

“How can you go...?” Advantage is a glorious thing, and it was Flute’s now. Robin could not argue against her. What could he say to deny the only true thing in the world?

That Robin loves Flute. Flute loves Robin. Don’t talk to me. Words are such silly things. They take up all the time for kissing. As for kissing ... why, you can never stop. Because you have never, really, begun. You have

never known this kiss before. And so, nothing at all of kissing has happened.

Quick! Start now! Before straining lips

214

have touched sour despair, known love for illusion, and how the dearest embrace may leave bitterness behind.

* * * * *

“I’m so happy,” whispered Flute.

It could never come again....

The sound of his broken words, as he pieced together the incredible fact, that he had made Flute’s happiness....

It could never come again....

That shivering touch upon her hair.

Never again, just like that, would they stand together, not daring to breathe upon the anguish that was joy in the mirror of their hearts.

* * * * *

As soon as she stopped shaking, Flute flew out of Robin’s arms, and left him standing there, under the ferny wall, at the mercy of the coming night.

215

Chapter Thirteen

WHEN Flute got back to Willow Hall, the Closed Carriage stood before the front door.

Flute dodged round behind it, went into the hall, and tried to look as though she had been there all the time.

If only she had not had the basket, and such an untidy head Flute might have succeeded.

Luckily, Granny, welcoming Bess, all by herself, was not disposed to quarrel with any audience.

“My dear, dear Bess! And so, here you are. Late of course, I never knew a train in these days that wasn’t. Now, my dear, you’ll be cold and I shall want to hear all the news.”

“Your dear Father. My first inquiry must be for him, so do come straight into the drawing-room. Let Flute take that bag.”

“How do you do, Flute?” said Bess coolly.

Bess was always cool.

A bright cheek and eye had Bess. A lively air, and great suggestion of animation. But with it Bess managed to convey her belief that you were not worth the display of what she promised.

At any rate, to her relations, Bess always spoke coolly, and seemed waiting someone worth while to make any effort.

Flute found herself standing on one apologetic leg. Then she also found Bess’s bright eye fixed firmly upon her. Flute wondered why, before remembering, with a start, widowhood, and its absent weeds.

216

Feeling less widowed than ever before, Flute followed Granny and Bess into the drawing-room.

Bess stood in the drawing-room, with her back to the fire, glancing round the furniture with a steady appraisement that would not have disgraced an auctioneer. Bess was always like that. Also Barbara and their dear father. Always so interested in the dear old things again. It was really wonderful what they noticed, only sometimes one did wish Henry needn’t say what a cabinet, just like that, might expect to fetch in a sale....

However, Granny never quarrelled with her own decisions, and resulting partialities.

Henry, Bess and Barbara might freely say what others would never be forgiven for thinking.

Granny, Bess and Flute had tea.

Bess asked for lemon in it. Was surprised that Granny never took lemon.

Granny, whose greatest bugbear was a demand for something not provided, stiffened and tossed her head a little behind the teapot.

She had asked after Henry's health three times, unaided by Bess, who seemed to have curiously little to say.

And, still more curiously, Bess was staring, very often, at Flute.

217

Flute, to whom important members of the family always paid the least of heed possible.

Granny remembered Flute's widowhood, resentfully.

There always seemed a trifle of pertness about it. Surely it was comparatively unimportant, too.

Granny talked on, without stopping, to Bess.

This was an effort, for Bess preserved what in anyone else would have been called a stupid, still tongue in her head. But, at last, Bess went away to unpack, leaving Granny so irritated that she was glad enough to scold a log for falling out of the fire.

Just before the dinner-bell, in came Bess, strolling. She wore a beaded slip, showing more arm than Granny would have cared to inspect in her bath, scratching the chair backs, and scented in a way that stunned the soft smoke and pot-pourri of the drawing-room.

Granny sniffed loudly, and flourished a large virgin handkerchief. Bess explained the attraction of "Y a Ça" with a cool smile. Unfortunately scent annoyed Granny more than anything.

"What on earth you want with it, Bess ... The bare idea of scent is most unpleasant to me. I don't talk of the horrible smell, it's just the dreadful idea.... I hardly like to

218

tell you two girls what your dear Great-grandfather used to say ... but, well ... I suppose, one of these days, you may have to hear something ... at any rate, Bess, I feel you ought to know, your dear Great-grandfather—such a

fine, brave, outspoken man he was, to be sure—once told your Great-grandmother that, in his opinion, when women used scent, it was only in order to ... I mean, only because of ... I should say, there were other things that needed ... what I mean is, that of course, had there been no reason ... well, well, of course, it's all rather awkward. At all events, Bess, perhaps I've made it quite clear enough that scent is totally unnecessary to any nice woman. Please don't use it again, my dear, while you are with me. Only to think of the waste of money is shocking. I daresay you gave over half a crown for a bottle of whatever it is you are soaked in."

"Well! Well! Let us not speak of the matter again, and I'm sure, Bess, I'm only too willing to forget it.

"There is the dinner-bell. Flute! Turn down the lamp, before we go."

Dinner was as formal as the largest soup tureen and every spare leaf in the table could make it.

The soup tureen cover, and the elegant

219

arch of its enormous ladle, held the situation in awe for the first two courses.

But by the time Bess found herself inspecting roast beef and the simplest of vegetables, even Granny was failed by formality.

Bess put her arms on the table, and most of her interest among the diamonds of her wristwatch. Granny tried to direct her frown at Flute, but this was difficult when she could never be certain what Bess would be about next.

Over the candied fruits, apples and tangerines of dessert, this was only too apparent.

Bess put a slim, expensive cigarette case on the table and played with it pointedly.

Granny asked why Bess need bring her calling-card case to the dinner-table.

There was a pregnant pause, and then Granny rose, tossing her head, and went out of the dining-room, indignation swinging her almost from wall to wall.

The same indignation prevented Granny from settling down to the evening in the drawing-room. She swung off down the room to inspect the bolts of the window-shutters at the far end, while Bess stood in front of the

fire, watching her and asking Flute whether Gran wasn't rather sweet, and if it wasn't all very amusing?

When Granny came back again, Bess did get

220

up from her especial chair, and try a few elementary subjects of conversation.

She agreed that Dad was frightfully fit, and Mum always on the run, so no wonder she got tired.

She went abroad six weeks ago?

Abroad? Oh! No, only to Paris.

That was foreign travel. Oh! Was it?

Yes. She still kept up her singing.

One had to, never quite free from the chance of the stage, as of course one was matey with heaps of people like Jack Hitthem, you know, the impresario, and loads of managers, no need to bother about all their names, to Granny, who, of course, knew; Granny had stiffened past all relief.

Even the idea of knowing actors, of course, could not cozen her dreadful calm.

Nothing consoling was left to Granny but the poker. And she upbraided the fire until the poor thing fell into despairing cinder, thereby sending everybody to bed.

Granny said Good-night more in sorrow than in anger. She shut her eyes while kissing Bess, the more readily to invoke her Father's image, for surely Henry could never have encouraged this....

She whisked what was left of any benedictory feelings at Flute, and swayed upstairs first,

221

to relieve her feelings by doing everything to her bedroom door except slamming it.

Flute, left with all the coolness of Bess, could hardly agree that it was all rather amusing.

And later, following Bess, at the bathroom, Flute met such an overpowering steam of "Y a Ça" that she could only feel thankful Granny's ideas of modern hygiene were always significantly expressed by the frigid fact of a hip-bath on her own cold bedroom floor.

Flute brushed her hair for the night, so dreamily, that her reflection in the glass grew misty.

She had so many things to think about, and none of them, it seemed, would come quite near her.

Vaguely, Flute saw Robin's smile, his white set face, the darkening garden, the glowing heart of the drawing-room fire.

Granny's frown, and Bess's cool, appraising eye.

She must be getting very sleepy, for everything, every one, swayed to her, like marionettes, impelled, and, with a flutter, were gone....

Flute went over to the wardrobe and took Cob from his drawer. Cob bowed over silver-tawny and horizon shaded stockings, and, finally, over Flute's shoulder, to whisper secrets into her ear.

222

Together they put out the gas, and scrambled into bed. Flute pressed her hottest cheek into the pillow; Cob, beside her, kindly tickled her nose with the peak of his cap.

Only one question mark of Flute's hair waved above the eiderdown, but it found surprising waving matter in the unusual sound of a knock at the door.

Flute said "Come in" to a candle, throwing every shape of shadow, and held by Bess.

"Aren't candles amusing?" Bess inquired. "I don't believe I've ever carried one before. The idea's quite joyful. No electricity, I mean. I do consider Granny the old world's pet. However she keeps it up? As I said to Dad, frankly, old man, it must be a pose. All rather too glorious. Carriage and pair, and Charity a close preserve at home. Dad didn't seem to think so. Old men are so sentimental. Said it was always like that. I said, well, I dunno, but I can't help feeling we ought to make something out of it. I mean, no one would believe it. I'd get Jack or somebody down to see it all, only the old dear doesn't seem to know that water and whisky aren't spelt the same."

Flute sat up in bed, for a candle encounter with Bess's bright eye.

Why was she favoured like this with Bess's amusement and opinions? Never before, most

223

certainly never at the cost of any effort, had Bess or Barbara made her free of their natural habits and behaviour.

Flute, wondering, met Bess's very bright eye again.

"Queer thing, Flute, the last time I saw you was on your wedding-day. All draped about in satin. Why did you let them make you up like that? The veil wasn't bad, though ... anyhow, Flute, it was all most curiously amusing, wasn't it? Edward Whayman, of all men. I don't suppose you cried your eyes out, did you? I mean, I imagine you hadn't had much time to look round ...

"By the by ... I suppose you're rather rich? The Whaymans were rolling, Dad said. And he rather wondered ... Such frightful luck, I mean. Well, I suppose eleven girls out of every team would give anything to get off so easily. I mean ... Well, of course, if you didn't care frightfully, why, my dear, the luck of it is enough to make most of us write up for the recipe ..."

Flute always felt helpless against the single-stick of slang conversation.

She turned to Bess, slowly; as she did so, Cob fell out of bed with a flop....

"Off the mantelpiece? Oh! You had him in bed with you...?"

224

There was a hard pause, impossible to chip.

Bess was staring steadily.

It wasn't only amusement, in her eyes, or contempt, or disdain....

"Of course ... you were—er—a widow, at once, weren't you...? I mean, no ... I mean you hadn't even got to the reception.... So you were ... no honeymoon, more or less, I mean. Or anything ..."

Flute leaned out of bed, and salvaged Cob from the floor.

"Frightfully amusing," murmured Bess. "Makes me think of a quite unpriceable operetta in Vienna, *La Veuve Belette*. Just scream after scream. Fancy you, Flute! However, I don't suppose you keep up this wide-eyed business all the time. Luck having those eyelashes. Blessings fairly bounce on the heads of the meek, don't they?"

"Amusing," said Bess, fingering Cob, absently. "Quite a joy to believe. I said so to Babs. She said ... Oh! Well, Flute, I suppose I must toddle. What on earth does one do in bed until two o'clock? I say—I rather like your toy. Congratulations, Flute. I do think it's clever of you to do the baby business,

right up to the hilt. When I get back to civilization I'll start a craze for taking dolls

225

to bed. My dear. Quite a thought. It ought to work out most amusing...."

"Amusing ..." repeated Bess. And she looked at Flute as though seeing something even more amusing than that....

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There was nothing less modern than the flip of backless mules as Bess went away. She carried her candle, dripping well-matched pearls, and only left uncostly shadows behind.

"Amusing, you know, amusing, but a coarse thread to weave into a dream. Get down, back into the silk of your hair, Flute. Or say the word, and I'll see about a cobweb. There's always a use for everything," said Cob the Clown.

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Granny was unusually early at breakfast the next morning.

She had evidently slept upon some decision, for her mouth was tightly folded, and she read prayers punctuated by vigorous sighs.

Someone tried the dining-room door-handle while prayers were going on, and Bess came in directly afterwards, to breakfast, with the same bright eye as last night's, but a canary sports-suit, and so, rather less unsheltered person.

Granny and Bess got on better this morning. Bess was so cool, even Granny gave up the trial

226

of heat upon her, and tossed her own head into a more familiar subject.

The Poor, always with us. And always so perplexingly. Not only the Poor ...

"And your Father can tell you, Bess, it has always been the same. It's not really the Poor themselves, but often the people I have to do with, about them, are enough to make a daft woman of dear Queen Victoria herself. Now you know it's just the time of year for our Mutton Dinners. Every year, soon after Christmas I'm accustomed to start them, as your dear Father knows. I arrange the whole matter myself; there's no call for anyone else to come bothering me with questions."

“I say ‘Mutton Dinners start on January seven,’ and that’s quite enough for anyone I should hope.

“Then what happens? Up comes Minnie Hawkins. I never did like Minnie. Always a grievance, and always beginning a cold.”

“There she was snivelling in this very room, only yesterday morning. Why had I asked Mrs. Jordan to lend us a hand with the first Mutton Dinner, and taken it for granted she would come without my mentioning it?

“‘Minnie,’ I said, ‘I’m speaking to you in all kindness when I say you are the most contrary creature that ever crossed my path.

227

How do you know I want you at all? You may as well know I don’t. What I want is a competent carver, and I wouldn’t trust you with the bones in a stockpot. If I let you loose about my Mutton Dinners, I should see you, for the rest of the year, with your arm in a sling. And what pleasure do you think I should get out of that? Six legs of mutton, and perhaps a couple of scrag-ends! Somebody’s got to carve them who can. Why should I fill up Emma Dane’s cottage with women no more use than the moth in a mantle border?’ That’s how I spoke to Minnie, and we can only trust it may have done some good.”

Granny nodded vigorously to Bess over her convictions. Bess’s silence did not seem to annoy her at all now. Bustling about her beliefs, Granny bowed the heads of her imaginary audience, and departed to consult Cook, the only person to whom she ever paid the slightest attention.

Left alone with Bess, Flute found herself as inconsiderable as she had been before last night’s confidence.

Bess whistled out of the window, and wondered if a roll round the garden would be worth while.

The morning, out in the garden, was rather remote. Clouds muffled it, just over the trees,

228

and brief glimpses of the sky were very pale and far.

Flute had never realized before how very little there was to be seen in the garden. How empty its earth, how dull and leafless its summer trees. How dull and black-green its winter ones.

Twigs and branches, weaving their passionate design of spells above Bess’s head, were impotent indeed.

“I suppose Gran won’t keep men enough here. Pity to let the place go to rack and ruin like this,” said Bess.

The garden was winter silent. There was no sound to answer her. The year, still holding its breath, would not whisper of treasure, hidden, to come.

Bess and Flute went all round the garden.

Beside the paths they followed, thick dark bushes, deeply entangled, held their dull foliage back from Bess’s canary-sports presence.

Bess and Flute crossed the road into the other garden, still in search of something to see. Flute lagged behind a little.

Bess went coolly on into the enchanted country where, only last night, Flute had been crowned a queen.

She walked in front of Flute, down the path between the currant bushes, desolate indeed, and quite cowering before Bess’s bright eye.

229

At the bottom of the path was a low, ferny wall. A small arch led through it, and a sound of heavy steps on the other side came up to it.

Robin, arriving at the arch, touched his cap to Bess and stood aside.

Bess was standing still, staring. The driving throbs of Flute’s heart shook the wall, and shivered its ferns. Would Bess never go on? Already Robin’s eyes had passed her. Robin was gazing at Flute. There was no hope of pretence for Flute or Robin any longer. Neither could ignore what the other could not stifle.

Robin looked miserable. Blank, Despairing. As he stood out of her path, Flute could see, his heart, drawn in wretchedness out of the way he told himself, was hers.

At last Bess went on. Flute moved up to Robin, and pushed two pink fingers into his stained ones.

“Robin ...”

“Flute! Hullo! there!” said Bess, turning carelessly. “Why, my dear, there’s nothing over here but a brace of the most decadent-looking greenhouses, and I simply cannot brace myself to do more than powder my nose inside one of them. Never before have I ruined a pair of shoes inspecting such a spot. Why, on earth, Gran doesn’t listen to Dad and sell the

230

place. Aren't people of that generation extraordinary? Oh! That's the Town, is it, down there? Well, dear heart, I'm glad you told me, otherwise I might have mistaken it for a dump of scrap-iron. My dear! It looks positively rusty. No wonder. See the fog coming up from the river."

"Why on earth Dad wanted me to spend a week here! I said I would, as he promised me ten pounds extra, this month, to oblige. He gets so sentimental, poor old man."

"However, dear, I can assure you, filthy lucre won't tempt little Bess, ever again.... That's Wych-elms, down there, isn't it...? Oh! Take it from me, a visit to Aunt Jane thrown in, and Dad will have to raise my ten pounds and double it...."

* * * * *

Up from the grey houses of the Town of Withy smoke came curling, the shape and colour of feathers. It rose above some chimneys, leaving them dark rose in sudden, reluctant sunshine.

Paler and paler, the smoke drew higher.

Now it was blue as eternal space, and its widening coils vanished as it lifted to plume the sky.

* * * * *

Over the path just below them went Robin

231

with a wheelbarrow. His eyes met Flute's.... "...Take it from me, he will ... Rather amusing, though ..." said Bess, carelessly.

232

Chapter Fourteen

FLUTE dared not wait upon her own happiness.
This joy, real as a flooded world, with one flood-wave risen, high as Heaven.

Like every lover, Flute must attempt the impossible. And, by holding her breath, try to bewitch the golden flood to glass, still its waves to crystal, and deny their power to break.

No one must guess anything.

Flute must keep her secret.

It was quite impossible that anyone should know.

Not that Flute felt frightened. For, of course, love is stronger than the whole world.

It only needed the most careless touch to arrest the march of events. Restrain Robin from sailing to Trinidad, take him, quite in princely-wise, out of Granny's garden, and start the delightful business of happy-ever-after.

But don't let's try that touch yet! Not just for one minute, only just this golden minute, that, however lovely Life is to be, can never come again!

Of course, there cannot be any difficulty anywhere, but this moment is so marvellous.

It's all belief, all incredulous.

All understanding. Everything to learn.

Tiny, stolen rushes into the garden. Only to sight Robin. Make him a sign. Scamper back again. A lovely tremble. A toy torment.

A whisper behind a bush: "I'm only teasing. Of course, I'll come again."

For Robin was bewitched quite. Quite unable to believe Flute. And, before she settled into his arms, Flute must play the Far Princess.

It was such fun. To see Robin, calm and at ease, no longer. To hold the invisible silk threads in one's hand, and dance the marionette, just for a smile or a shrug. Robin walked Granny's garden in a dream, and only woke to hear Flute say, "Dream it again."

When Flute turned to less insistent matters she found Bess's cool smile.

This, indeed, was pretty well all either Flute or Granny could find of Bess, who had evidently decided to curb her extravagance here.

By lunch-time, that first day, Bess had apparently nothing more to notice, think, or say.

Luckily Granny must have taken some decision

233

which enabled her to ignore everything about Bess except her ability to listen.

And, owing to the happy chance of Granny's first Mutton Dinner tomorrow, no one could say there was not plenty to listen to.

All Granny's charities were personal affairs, but Mutton Dinners were a direct arrangement between Granny, her forbears, and the Almighty.

For ninety-nine years, so nearly a hundred, Granny's family had manipulated Mutton Dinners.

Not that they had refused to let other people into them. A reliable butcher to supply the mutton legs, a charitable grocer to give the swathing rice, a respectable woman to cook those legs and hire out a room where they could be carved. And of course the Poor to come with very empty basins, suitable expressions and the right sort of mumble of thanks.

Moneys had been left to Mutton Dinners. Pious, passing persons had willed small but sturdy sums to such effect.

Granny kept these sums in the Post Office Savings Bank, and yearly scolded a hapless clerk, in the Post Office's employ, for making his "sevens" so exactly like his "fives," and putting down the interest in a place she never expected it.

Only one weakness did Granny display concerning

234

her pet Charity. Granny was an excellent carver, but even Granny's vigorous little right arm was not equal to six legs of mutton a week, for six weeks at least.

So for some time before Mutton Dinners were due to commence, Granny went about Withy, burying hatchets and keeping a sharp look-out for good carving arms.

It was no use at all. Carvers had to be found. Whatever their calling, whatever their denomination. In the early days of January a neat way with mutton slices took precedence of every virtue man or woman might lack.

Strange tales went over the hills of Withy. About old Captain Sewarthy, torn from his glass of grog, directly after Christmas, although the queer

smell, noticed constantly on the days he did the carving, distressed Granny into deciding not to bow to him in the street from April to December.

That poor old Miss Murphy. Such a curious person, one could never hear what she said, and perhaps it was just as well.

Her clothes, too, always so odd. People walking behind her were never quite certain what they were going to see....

But a wonderful carver. Noone could make a mutton leg go farther.... And, at any rate, Miss Murphy gave no trouble for the rest of the year.

235

Granny, sighting her from the carriage, always made a point of bowing, although, sometimes, not until Miss Murphy was past....

Mutton Dinner morning dawned in a well-polished way. A nice bright sun did Providence credit, and Granny, going down her hill between her granddaughters, felt Nature supporting her properly. The Town of Withy was spread out before them, and Granny enlivened their progress down and up hill by dramatic anecdotes, illustrative of how often she had spoken, and how seldom she had listened.

Bess only spoke once, and that was to say:

“Well, Gran, I’m sure it seems as though every one simply hangs on your words. Even your gardener. Lucky, aren’t you, to have your servants so attached to you, in these days? Do you know that tall, alluring-looking youth you’ve got in the garden has been following us, quite close behind, all the way? He’s just there now....”

There was a sudden, pebbly pause.

Flute, who knew Granny, knew Bess had come in, somehow, where a blindfolded angel would have known better than to tread.

“Thank you, Bess, I’m sure, for letting me know. Dear me, what a beautiful morning it is! But, as I always say, one has got to remember that beauty isn’t everything. Or looks,

236

either. Nor even money and position, sometimes. I’m sure I should be only too glad to have Lord Fairmyle or poor old Sir Roger Horley to help me carve my Mutton Dinners, but there, we must abide by Providence, and just take what offers. I should never choose either Captain Sewarthy or Jane’s Simmons’s Robert, out of the garden, but I’m bound to say I’ve been about

the Town, keeping my eyes open since November, and, upon my word, I don't see how I can do any better."

Then Granny changed the subject with a slight snort, and told a story pointedly concerned with a grandmother, a granddaughter and an unsuccessfully sucked egg, which brought everybody to Mutton Dinner door.

Emma Dane's cottage was so extremely small that however six legs of mutton got into it, let alone the carvers, the helpers and the indulged Poor, must ever be a matter of conjecture. Emma Dane had been housemaid at Willow Hall in the days when domestic service was greeted by curtsies.

Emma Dane still met Granny in this suitable way, and the lower she went the higher she rose in Granny's estimation.

"A very nice woman. I heartily approve of Emma. And she married a boy out of my stables. I never would hear a word against

237

either of them. Although your Father, Bess, had a dreadful story of poor Ben, once, suspected of being the worse for liquor. I told your Father he ought to be ashamed of himself, coming to me with a tale like that. And, your Mother, Flute ... how well I remember saying to Jenny, 'Now, Jenny, that's enough, I don't want to hear any more. Emma's hair is not red, and it's only red-haired girls who are fast, from what I've found. Emma, out in the stables, until no one knows what hour? 'Well, Jenny,' I said, 'if I never heard nonsense before, I've heard it now.' And then, Jenny had a red-haired child herself.... I've often wondered ... however, Providence moves in a mysterious way, and it's not for us to ask questions we know will never be answered."

The first morning of Mutton Dinners was always an occasion. Emma Dane's railings were buttoned with the noses of the young, and the rheumatic forms of the old blocked most of her pavement.

Granny bustled in, peppering greetings on her way, and was immediately in the thick of everything.

Thick, everything was. The atmosphere, the steam from the mutton legs, the press of questions no one had the time to answer.

It really seemed as though everybody present

238

must have been boiled down to get them into the cottage at all. Faces, stray feet and arms, occurred in the prevailing broth, but whole persons were no more. Even Granny's bonnet seemed all that was left of her.

Granny's voice appeared to have lodged in the mutton legs.

Every now and then a chipped or cracked basin materialized out of the steam, wavered and vanished as without human agency.

Granny's voice rejoined her bonnet to shoo away the enticed Poor, trying to enter.

Granny's spirit was to be sensed, staggering all over the situation.

"Jane Hamley's basin again? Oh! No, certainly not. No, on no account, Captain Sewarthy, and I wonder if you could cut the slices a little smaller? There's Sally Triptit's bowl coming now, and I'm not at all sure about Sally. Someone—I shall mention no names—told me they had seen her wiping her mouth on her apron, not fifty yards from the Goose and Gosling. And, in that case—however, let us listen to no harm of the poor woman. John Fear's basin? Well, I never. Oh! Yes, I suppose so, poor old man, although I must say I should be glad to see him give up that everlasting pipe of his, first."

The little cracked basins, some wretched

239

with wan flowers, some ruefully plain, came up, from hand to invisible hand.

Granny scolded each of them in turn, and, in turn, filled it to overflowing.

Emma Dane's cottage grew hotter and hotter.

Bess, tired of breathing gravy, and choking over rice, had gone outside.

Flute was squashed flat against an oleograph of a farmer pulling a small child on to a large haycart, and entitled "There's Plenty of Room for All."

A fresh mutton leg had appeared from nowhere. Captain Sewarthy, with all the courage of the Senior Service, was humming it rather a beery song, about rum, and wives in port. However, there was no sound of reproach from Granny.

Between the fat-fumes Flute saw why Granny was very busy indeed about Robin. She was standing beside him, shaking her active bonnet at his chin.

Robin was smiling gently, considerately, and quite agreeing that was the right way with an expert carving knife....

Granny, gratified, shook her bonnet faster and faster.

“There, now, there. And another time, Robert, I hope you’ll remember it. Very few people, indeed, are really good carvers. Poor

240

Miss Jane, now, no one was ever worse with a knife, I’m bound to admit it.

“Although, more than one gentleman has spoken of my carving, and said

...

“However, I suppose it doesn’t do to think about these things afterwards.... That’s right, Robert, and that’ll do, I think. You’d better be getting back now. You know, there’s a bough off one of the big elms, caught in that chestnut at the bottom of the lower drive? Whimpey will be back for a short time, sometime to-day, so you’d better tell Jim, and get that bough away, between you. There! That’ll do.”

Granny was going on with the carving herself. Anecdotes of her own ability had refreshed the muscles of her carving arm.

Granny, saluted by the thickest steam, waved her mantle hem in and out of the gravy, and treated the last of a mutton leg to a taste of her determination.

Mutton Dinner was easing off a little.

Three mutton legs at least were now reduced to mere memorial bone. Two of the more unnecessary helpers had wished Granny “Good morning,” and the Poor were beginning to push, rather purposefully, outside.

“Very well, then, I suppose they can come in,” said Granny. “Robert! Tell Martha

241

Hopkins I want to speak to her. Do it carefully now; I don’t want all the Poor of three parishes in here, worrying me, while I’m still carving.”

Robin couldn’t leave at that moment for he was still engaged holding the restless extremity of Granny’s particular mutton leg, and the Poor took advantage of the moment to come in. They draped the doorway with significant mumblings and festooned it with basins, suddenly, mysteriously, empty again.

Granny turned sharply, with the carving knife still in her hand.

She waved it as vigorously as ever the classic Farmer’s Wife. Had there been only three blind Poor, instead of a parishful of the halt and the deaf, matters might, perhaps, have become a little awkward.

As it was, Granny only set to work scolding everybody, friend and infringer alike, and shortly Flute and Robin found themselves whisked outside with a few of the more easily detachable Poor.

Outside, only the morning sun awaited them.

Interest in the first Mutton Dinner had evaporated with the steam of the first-filled basins.

A child's broken toy lay in the gutter.

Bess was nowhere to be seen.

242

Robin picked up the broken toy and laid it carefully on the nearest window-ledge.

"Flute. Miss Flute," said Robin, hesitating, "may I see you home?"

* * * * *

Flute never forgot that walk back to Willow Hall, in the light winter sunshine, with Robin. It was, she thought, rather a picture of their whole acquaintance. Demure pacing of simple ways, a corner turned, and, over a roof-top, a sudden, heart-catching little jewelled model of a view. And, always, over every-day streets and houses, sunshine, like a blessing, that warmed one's cheeks and hands before one knew....

At the foot of Willow Hill, Flute, grown very brave, slid her hand between Robin's arm and his heart. She was going to say something—something really and truly advancing.

Definite.

All she managed was:

"Robin. It would be nice—wouldn't it?—if it could be—always—like this?"

* * * * *

Granny arrived home, late for lunch, rather flushed, and certainly tired after the alarm and excursion of her first Mutton Dinner.

Fatigue, with Granny, always took one form.

243

Firm determination to do as much as possible in its despite.

She hurried Bess and Flute over their lunches, and dared either of them to suggest repose for the afternoon.

After lunch, Granny walked the whole house, muttering to herself, and finally came out of her bedroom, all mantled and bonneted, carrying three large baskets, two of which she presented to Bess and Flute in rather an ominous way.

“We are going round the garden,” said Granny, and went first, waiting at every corner in case Bess or Flute might be caught coming up and saying something open to contradiction.

Bess and Flute said nothing at all.

Both seemed oddly absent.

Bess yawned twice, and Granny asked if she “had the gapes.” Bess smiled so irritatingly that Granny found herself with something to reprove at last.

She was just going to begin, when a sound of shouting and swishing from the lower drive interrupted her.

“I must go and see about my bough,” cried Granny, and went off at such a tremendous rate she rocked the bushes on each side of her path.

The lower drive was sufficiently full of excitement to satisfy even Granny.

244

Whimpey was leaning on a stick in the middle of it. Aunt Jane’s garden boy, up with a hamper, had joined the fray. Jim, Granny’s garden boy, was running about, shouting, and two of his friends, happening to pass the gates, lent their interest to the general effect.

Granny charged among them, waving her basket and demanding knowledge of what it all meant.

Whimpey touched a stiff rheumatic cap, and said as how it was young Robin Simmons up that there tree.

“Well,” said Granny, “and so he ought to be. Why not?”

“All right long’s he keeps against the trunk.”

“Bless the boy. Let him keep against the trunk, then.”

“’Tain’t much use, ’M. Bough’s caught, out on the branches.”

“Well! Tell him to get at it.”

“I’ve seen him giddy, out on a far branch.”

Everybody was shouting at once.

Robin Simmons, up in the tree, stood against the trunk, unmoving.

So still, indeed, it was difficult to separate him from the tree itself. A slight movement of the branches round him as his hands tightened or

slacked.

245

Robin was very high up. Standing on the last branch able to bear him.

Whimpey drew near Granny, and whispered:

“Should see the lad climb, ’M. Up through the boughs like as if he was passing among friends. ’Ud say he’d been born under a lost oak.”

Granny shaded her eyes from the last of the sun. There was no more shouting now.

Every one was staring up at the figure of Robin, just beginning to move out towards the caught bough.

“No one to climb like he,” Whimpey muttered to himself.

A sharp crackling answered him.

Robin, on his hands and knees, crawled outwards.

Silence held below him.

“Giddy?” exclaimed Granny, as though she were answering it. “Why should a boy who can climb like that get giddy?”

“None to say,” said Whimpey, watching hard. “’Tis so with many. Do so much, arter that, the Almighty knows the rest. Ah! Looks to be, he’ll ... steady, there, steady ...”

A steady crackling went on.

Robin was crawling outwards, so slowly it was hard to see him move at all.

Bess and Flute had come out of a side path through the bushes.

246

Even Bess stood still. Flute was caught to stillness as though the moment had claws.

Robin had climbed some way along the branch. And the branch, which had lately waved protectingly round him, was now swaying and crackling ominously.

Robin wasn’t within touching distance of the caught bough yet....

Yes! He was. Its first twigs at his finger-tips.

Steady. The branch sways more, now....

A cloud had moved away behind the tree. Left the sun, hanging there, a great rose-gold treasure, with a twig or two brushing across it. All watching shaded their eyes with their hands as Robin crawled, still more slowly, and this time, to be silhouetted against the sun.

His hand was stretched out to the tangled bough. But it looked, against the sun, as though he were stretching out towards a treasure. Would he ever get it...?

A cry came from nowhere....

Not from one of the watchers. Yet it came, certainly from the earth, down there, below.

“Steady there.... Now!” exclaimed Whimpey. “Ah!” With a passionate hiss the caught bough fell free, down to the dead thud of the earth, receiving it, at last....

Up above, a crack. Another.

247

“Stand close. Stand clear ... ah! ...”

What had happened?

Why! It hadn’t.... There was Robin, crawled right back to the trunk again....

What on earth ... Never say there’s none of witchcraft left about, these days.

In their common gasp of surprise, town and country born alike, acknowledged strange forces, too wise for this world....

Granny gave a sigh of relief.

Robin, swarming down the chestnut-trunk, gave it, for a minute, passionate life.

Then all the trees were still.

“Well,” said Granny, “so that’s all right, is it? Jim! Help Robert to clear away this mess. Look at my poor drive. More twigs about it than gravel. I shall be glad to see it looking tidy again as soon as can be; so all of you stop standing about there, gaping. Bess! Flute! You’d better come along. It will soon enough be time for our tea.”

“Come on, Flute,” said Bess.

Flute turned in a daze to see Bess staring curiously at her.

“Very well, then,” said Bess, still staring. “If you don’t want to ... of course ...”

With a shrug she had turned, and must have gone—after Granny....

248

Yes. They must have gone, for the drive was empty. Whimpey and Jim were beating about in the bushes, stamping the fallen boughs to pieces.

Robin was in there with them.

Flute could see his bare roughened head.

And once his arm raised with a scarlet streak across it. The bough had wreaked a little red revenge, after all.

Flute stood still, by herself.

She could not have told anyone how long she stood there, or what she felt.

Time marched past to a muffled drumming in her ears. A refrain beat it by.

“This is Time itself, whispering. Quicken yourself. Make haste. Don’t stand still to dream.”

But Flute could not have stirred any more than a laurel Daphne. Every now and then a little shudder ran over her.

Nothing personal. Only an errant breeze gone by. But the last breeze was cold....

The sun had gone in. The drive was no longer empty. It was full of hurried shadows. Soon, they would bring the night....

How quiet it was!

The men must have gone....

Flute ran with the shadows, round the trees, up to the house.

249

The front door stood open. Shivering a little, Flute went inside.

* * * * *

The hall was much darker than the garden. And it felt rather reproachful. The logs in the fireplace had burnt away.

A chill crept up to Flute.

Flute stood, carefully wiping her shoes on the mat. At least she need not commit the crime of tracking garden mould all over the floor. Suddenly the drawing-room door handle turned sharply. Granny’s voice came out into the hall.

“Bess! Don’t go. Come back, I want to speak to you ... when did you first notice anything of the sort...? I want to know.”

Bess it must have been who opened the door. But she did not come out.

She left the door, just ajar, and her voice sounded as though she was walking back into the drawing-room again.

“Oh! I don’t know, Gran. Directly I came I noticed something. Of course I thought it slightly queerish. But then, you know, every one has always known Flute was odd. Didn’t she arrive when least expected, or what not? And, well, that marriage of hers had a touch of ... well! I mean, no ordinary sort of girl would ever have.... Still, I

250

don’t know that one can blame the kid. She’s had a pretty peculiar time, by all accounts. And, after all, whatever harm is there in it? Personally I never picked on chauffeurs or stokers or such, but I suppose there’s no real harm in kissing a gardener.”

“No harm in kissing a gardener? A boy in my garden? Bess! Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“I wouldn’t fret, Gran. Anyway I didn’t exactly see the kissing close-up. Though I’ll admit the eye-rolling going on was a bit exhausting. And certainly I saw them trying to hold hands.... Well, I’m only telling you. Flute’s evidently slightly enamoured. All this babe-in-a-dream business. You know what I mean.... I thought I’d tell you, Gran, because, after all, it’s rather a pity. I’d no idea Edward Whayman left his money tied up like that. And—well—when it comes to the possibility of Flute floating off with a garden boy, however lovable and luscious, and missing—is it fifteen hundred a year at twenty-five...? Certainly I’ll speak to her if you think it will do any good, but ...”

“Speak to her...? Speak to Flute.... A granddaughter of mine, holding hands, making love, kissing one of the boys in the garden.... Thank you, Bess, I’m sure.

251

Thank you. But if there’s any speaking to be done, I’ll do it myself. The idea. The very idea of Flute ...”

There was the undoubted sound of Granny stamping over the drawing-room.

Flute, at the open front door, stood quite stupidly still, while the drawing-room door was flung wide, Granny’s infuriated bonnet, blocking Bess’s cool amusement just inside it.

“Flute!” stormed Granny, seeing her. “Flute! Come here, right in here, at once.”

And Flute must have come, for the next thing she remembered was Granny shaking every tassel on the silk mantelpiece cover, she was shouting so, and still, Bess's cool canary amusement behind them.

"Now, what of this is true? What of it all is true?" shouted Granny. "Don't dare to say a word to me. I've never before heard such a thing in my life. Ashamed of you, Flute? Why, I simply cannot credit any of it. Thank goodness Bess told me in time to stop it. Every bit of it. Flute! How dare you? And as for that rascally boy, off he goes tomorrow, and every man in this Town shall know why."

"Now you answer me at once," Granny stormed on.

A tiny log fell, burning, out of the fire.

252

It licked at the poker, and died away.

All Flute's attention was upon it.

"Answer me," Granny was still shouting, "and tell me the truth if you can. Of course you can't. A wicked, shameful girl, without a word to say for herself, or to give her poor Grandmother any comfort either. To think of me, at my age, having to hear a thing like this. A boy in my garden? A great lout of a garden boy. Well, he shall never dare show his face in these parts again, I'll see to that. Your poor, poor dear Grandfather. When I think of what he has been spared!"

Granny's voice was so loud. The drawing-room might expect silence when it died away.

But the drawing-room wasn't silent.

First it rustled, and then a rushing sound went over it. Something flowing through it, away. And tearing as it went.

Flute hardly felt anything. Something far stronger than Flute seemed to be doing all the feeling necessary....

And then the rushing died down, and Flute knew exactly what she felt....

She felt everything was over. Snapped and gone. Every tie that had held her. Every knot that had twisted her life, and no single knot of her own making.

Nothing mattered. No one.

253

For everything had come down to this.

Cool, indifferent amusement—and a shouting to deafen the voice of any heart.

Once, someone had said to Flute:

“And it’s the shouting you remember, when you have forgotten the kindness....”

So, someone must have spoken the truth to Flute, once, after all....

Affection amounted to this ... in an hour of need, plenty of noise, and iced uncaring....

“There is nothing else, at all,” thought Flute. “Except what one used to believe, stars one has seen from a nursery window ... flowers, perhaps, the people who love them, and ... and friends like Cob....”

That was the only time Flute felt like crying. And, at once, the shocking stumble of fresh words from Granny scared the tears away.

“Rue the day, I tell you plainly, that dastardly young Robert shall rue the day. To think of the scoundrel, and only this very morning I was teaching him to carve properly.

“Carve properly! I’ll carve him properly.”

“I’ll ... Oh! Where’s my stick and basket? Not another word, now, either of you.

“Down I go, straight away, to tell Jane.”

254

At least they had all been quite right about Flute being a baby until this moment.

And Granny was too excited to realize that this moment had arrived.

Something was rushing through the drawing-room again. The shadows had changed into dark winds and waters. Those winds and waters were all of them charged with the spirits of people who had given up everything to defend their lovers.

Flute, a lost child, scolded in her Grandmother’s drawing-room, was caught in those strange elements. A little child, she stood, heaving up her either hand, small and helpless, but suddenly determined.

Granny could say what she liked. Indeed, no one could stop her. But she should only say it to her furnitures and familiars, not to Flute, who loved Robin.

* * * * *

To love is to protect. To long to protect is to find oneself helpless.
Everything all round her was mocking Flute's helplessness.

All the things she had always known.

And she must deny them all now.

She must protect Robin with no weapons, but Love and its tied, helpless hands.

She must go, go quickly.

Something must be done, for Granny, raging

255

after each passing minute, was hurrying on disaster, with every explosive breath.

Knowing Granny, Flute knew that nothing would calm her but the sacrificial smoke of ruins she had created.

Then Granny might pause, possibly consider.

But, then, the ruins would be.

* * * * *

Flute turned and ran out of the drawing-room.

Granny, behind her, was left calling on High Heaven as no one else seemed able to stoke her righteous indignation, suitably.

Bess, behind her, still seemed amused, although her smile had become rather fixed.

That was all Flute knew as she ran out with the dark wind.

* * * * *

Quickly, quickly, something must be done.

The awful nakedness of this bare moment must be clothed, somehow.

As a little girl, Flute had always felt so sorry for all naked things, especially naked dolls. Their painful starkness. Their poor, incredible joints, waiting to be twisted with protestant squeaks. Gruesome glimpses of the cord that really held those glazed limbs together ... Dolls ...

The helpless things made in the image of man for nearly every man to despise....

256

One thought rode high over all the thoughts raging in Flute's head.

Cob the Clown ... what Granny had said to him. What she would say and do when she found Flute gone. Cob left behind.

Cob? Cob was a symbol. A symbol of all the tender things people trample, pity, perhaps, a little, and pass over.

Cob was something made for all the world to laugh at.

It was only Robin who would not laugh.

Flute must save Cob ... save Robin....

Flute ran on.

Passed the old globe on the half-landing.

Passed the door of the box-room, which must be left to its own still secrets for ever now.

Into her bedroom, to jerk her stocking drawer on to the floor.

Dark, dark ... why, the whole world was growing darker every minute.

On the floor Flute's stockings lay, colourless as dead flowers, woven round into a funeral wreath. There was just a little brightness, detaching itself from Cob's legs.

Cob bowed against Flute's shoulder, into her hair.

Oh! It is only the things of naught. The scraps, of no consequence to the serious works of man, that bring comfort, and no scorn.

257

"Come with me, dear. We'll go together. I'll look after you, and keep you safe."

Flute hardly knew whether she whispered to Cob or to Robin. She only knew that out of her utter helplessness she must mother and protect the world.

* * * * *

All over the house there was the sound of running feet. Or was it only the echo of Flute's?

At any rate, many shadows were going past. How heavy was the silence of their passing!

Flute ran on downstairs.

Up the stairs came a cold stream of air. Someone must have opened the hall door again.

Yes. There were voices down in the hall.

Bess's, with the chill of welcome on it.

Some angry muttering, that sounded like Granny, daring her wrath to die down.

And another: "... Where is she? ..."

Flute stood on the bottom stair of the last flight into the hall, her tangled head thrown back, defying them all.

Now, at last, plain rage had its way with her. They were all against her.

Granny, Bess, Aunt Jane.

Flute must have been counting on Aunt

258

Jane, somehow. For the sight of Aunt Jane, grouped into the family camp, snapped a last string Flute did not know had held.

They were all against her, then.

Well, very well, they should see....

Past sense, past reason, past all but a blind, furious blundering, Flute waved Cob over her head, and laughed as she ran through the hall.

She pushed aside a hand that might have belonged to Bess, took no notice of a broken sentence—"of all the ..."—undoubtedly Granny's, and only turned her head a little to see the glazed, strange whiteness of Aunt Jane's face....

There was a little black pause at the stiff hall-door handle, and then nothing at all but the huge empty world echoing a wild slamming to the earliest stars.

259

Chapter Fifteen

STREET lamps and stars were busily pricking out, all over the Town of Withy.

The night, making more of a showing than the day, bringing down its dark sky, as if to tent over some carnival.

Flute set her lips hard together, and clutched Cob very close, before running down the drive between the trees.

No earthly disturbance, however potent, could make Flute ignore the terror of those trees at night.

Black magic, sanctified by strength and shadow size, ruled the Willow Hall drive from sunset to sunrise.

The house and garden crept to nothingness at its feet. How anyone dared burn tree logs upon a fire, during those hours, Flute had often wondered.

A magic which could ignore such insults must be vast beyond fear.

And here were Flute and Cob at its mercy.

Down into the deepest shadow went Flute, whispering, "Robin, Robin," into Cob's ear.

Juliet, in the vault, called no less bravely upon Romeo....

"We shall soon get to the gate," Flute comforted Cob's ear.

Opposite the gate an absurd street lamp idled with a few of the lesser shades. It winked rather vulgarly at Flute, as if to ask:

"Well, what about it? Now?"

Flute sat Cob on the top of the gate, and leaned her heart against a lower rail. Her heart felt terribly tired. Still, it wasn't safe to stay

260

still here. Already the trees whispered to the shadows above her head. At any moment tree-whispers and human shouting might make one.

"Come, dear," said Flute. She and Cob slipped round an incredible crack of gate and went on down the hill.

Flute started to run. She felt too tired to walk and encounter the questions more deliberate paces would encourage.

Where was she going?

Oh! Well! ... where?

Down in the Town, Flute stood on the bridge over the dark secret of the river.

She took stock of the situation. A coat. No hat. Cob. Her purse left behind her. Not a plan in her head. The night about her. What else?

“No one to care,” added Flute, after reflection.

Had Aunt Jane been on her side she might have gone straight to Robin. As it was, what was the first thing Aunt Jane and Granny would do? Rush, storming, to the Simmons’s cottage, and if they found Flute there set fire to the whole world, dismiss Robin and his parents to its nether end.

Or perhaps the Simmons’s themselves outraged by the whole matter, would refuse to let Flute in at all? Whatever Robin might...

261

Ah! What was this love that burnt like a torch only to bring torment and destruction?

“No one to care,” muttered Flute.

* * * * *

“Ha!” said Cob, under her hair. “You are forgetting. Forgetting the real things. The things that were in the beginning. Real comfort. Nursery floors and suchlike.... Hum! ... why not try ’em again? No harm, if no good. We can’t stay here all night. Why not go up to your Nurse?”

* * * * *

“Oh! Cob, I will.”

* * * * *

“You be careful, Flute. ‘I will’ is dangerous saying. It’s what you say at the end of all this ... not half-way through.... And we’re not even half-way to Nurse’s yet.... Come along, Flute, that’s right.”

“Right. We’re right, you and I, Cob....”

* * * * *

It is a good thing to make friends with shadows.

If it had not been for all the running shades at her side, Flute felt sure she could never have climbed to the top of Nettleship Hill. They helped her a great deal.

Through little chequered streets twisting off sideways into the night.

262

Flute had never gone through Withy at night, alone, before. A steam of life she had never suspected rose about her—gone was the demure countenance of day.

Would Granny have recognized her charitied Poor in these stumbling-blocks of shadow, heaving on and off pavements, with queer, loud sounds, quite strange to Flute?

Flute passed by, as quickly as she could, with her own shadows. One, especially, went over all the walls beside her, in the shape of a knight holding a banner that grew and shrank above a bent, attentive head.

He only left her at the top of the last town street of Withy.

Here the country started suddenly.

Small houses and cottages slept, sunk deeply into their gardens, the road bent and twisted up to the hill-top, its pavement full of pools of shadow. Against the night, two great trees whispered at the sky-line. A very few lamps shone casually upon the laurel bushes of the nearest gardens.

There was nothing of importance to deny the night. The night was very still, but the stillness of a hill-top is never the stolid silence of a valley. Up here, a whisper, a rustle, ran over the world. Flute was running, too. But so very slowly. A little hammering in her

263

throat seemed to be beating her back. And the road looked very strange.

Flute ran past thudding bushes, and turned two corners blindly.

Then, up in front of her, a kindly guide sprinkled a few stars.

Nettleship Hill End, and, at it, Nurse's cottage.

Nurse's cottage was one of a row.

Most of the other cottages were dark, but Nurse's had a bright orange square beside the front door.

When she recognized it, Flute allowed herself to feel how frightened she had been.

She fumbled, anyhow, at Nurse's surprised gate, almost fell over the path, up to the sentry-box porch....

Nurse's knocker was of a steady-going disposition. Difficult to persuade at any time, the novelty of a knock at night almost paralysed it completely.

Persistent appeals, however, at last released it into a single vast report, enough to shake Nettleship Hill-side.

"Well, I never ..." cried Nurse, on one side of it.

"Nan—oh! Nan," cried Flute, on the other.

... Flute's Nurse would have been the first to tell you that there is a time for everything.

264

So often, that time is the Lord's own good time. Never a time for question.

Nurse, seeing Flute at her door, saw, behind her, a hundred shadow reasons for her being there. Most of them connected with Others, and those Others tiresome and distressful.

Nurse had never held with interference.

Someone must have been interfering with her Flute. Her own dear child. "Bless you ... come in."

Nurse welcomed Flute as gladly as a prophecy come true.

Words of her own, come home to roost at last. No doubt about it. Someone had worried Miss Flute just once too often.

Nurse led the way into her sitting-room, and turned up an imposing lamp until the ceiling shivered.

"What did I say?" asked Nurse, triumphantly, of a conquered universe.

Flute sat down on Nurse's best horsehair sofa. She sat, anyhow, on a beaded cushion. She pulled down two antimacassars. She wrinkled the small rag rug at her feet. The tears ran down her cheeks as if they would never stop.

It seemed as though all the world were running away. Not that it mattered, only one must try to explain something, however flooded one felt.

265

"Nan," said Flute, "Nan." She got no further. Just sat there crying the whole world away.

Nurse sat down beside her, and said, "Dear, Dear. Talk of trouble, and, well, if it doesn't walk in at the door. Not that Sister Anna, being gone from home just to visit Brother Fred for the sake of her health and the change, could be much of a trouble; still talk of troubles, and if Mrs. Horler had been in, talking of one, she'd been talking of twenty. And now, my own dear Miss Flute, but don't you cry. 'Tain't worth it, me dear, not anything one of Them can do to you. I dessay it may be yer Granny—and her never a one to stop in time to save a feeling.... Mind, now, not a word against Mrs. Lemander when it comes to helping the Poor, it's just the unfortunate way she does seem to have got with her own flesh and blood. 'Ooever got

the better o' anything with shouting it down? ... Well, I remember when you 'ad that new pink silk dress, and she should say What in the world and with that hair, quite putting you to shame-like over the pretty thing.... 'Owever I did speak up that time, and straight out did I say ... There, there, my own dear child, don't you be frettin'. Tell me which one of Them's worth it, first."

Flute leaned her head against Nurse's shoulder.

266

Her tears made almost merry with the prickly little tassel that ended Nurse's silver watch-chain upon her chest.

There was no need for any explanations, after all. No need for understanding, because no misunderstanding could be.

Nurse was covering up all the cruelty of the world, in her own way. Much as she had drawn the nursery curtains against the darkness outside in days gone by.

There was a flop, out of Flute's arms, down on to the floor.

"Bless us indeed!" cried Nurse, stooping serenely after Cob, on her best rag rug. "Well, dear, I'm glad to see you can take a bit of comfort in something natural. I do always say, After all, a toy, we start with 'em, and, bless me, I don't know but what we carry a good many of 'em along with us, from font to funeral. Who knows, me dear? There ain't no saying where comfort comes from ... who's to tell Well, I'm glad you thought of bringing anything you care about along with you, to me..."

Nurse and Flute sat together.

Flute's tears dried into short sobs.

Nurse's hand stroked her hair.

Nurse's clock ticked the comforting minutes away.

267

On Nurse's comfortable knee Cob the Clown bowed to his own feet with a slight air of congratulation.

Flute gave three large sighs at the end of one last sob.

Then she pressed a hot cheek against Nurse's grey wool shoulder, and rubbed the silver watch-chain tassel to and fro with her nose, as she built up a sorry little card-castle of facts for Nurse's inspection.

Nurse rocked Flute, on her shoulder, gently backwards and forwards. She also rocked Cob on her knee still, and, by the look of him, pensively

disposed.

Nurse showed not the slightest surprise, and was evidently determined not to feel any.

Nurse had the universe at her feet, with the best rag rug.

What had she always said?

No good could come of Them all pushing Miss Flute about, worrying her, and teasing her into marrying a gentleman as the Almighty Himself could never have meant for her at that age.

Nurse had said exactly what she thought upon the subject at the time, as poor Anna could answer for, if she wasn't away with Fred. It was all Their doing. Nurse hoped They were pleased with the result.

268

Nurse looked a dark plural in the direction of Willow Hall, where Mrs. Lemander reigned alone among her trees.

Nurse and Granny had never seen eye anywhere near eye.

Granny, tossing her head over Nurse's indulgence. Nurse, hers, over Granny's harshness. Granny, speaking pointedly of the excellent disposition of the Withall family up to now. Nurse, making no reply, with a grimness that could be felt.

And this was what it had all come to!

Well! Well! Let's consider no more but the dear child herself.

The strange lateness of the hour. The still stranger sweetness of Flute, come back to the shelter of her heart again, may have given a charmed twist to Nurse's view.

Certain it is that she heard the unlikely story of Robin, out of the garden, and never doubted or disapproved.

As she told on, Flute began to wonder how Nurse's stiff delicacy would reflect "no gentleman."

Barriers had been Nurse's business.

What would she say to barriers, flung down?

* * * * *

Nurse went on stroking Flute's hair, gently as ever. The fire whispered, flickered and

269

died away. Still the story went on, and Nurse's stroking hand.

“My dear,” whispered Nurse. “Some see one way. Some another. The Lord’s will should be our way, and Them as goes against a loving heart never did go after the Lord. We should take as we find, without any amazement. And there, dear, if so be you do love this young fellow ’tis not for Them to interfere. My blessing be on my own dear Miss Flute. Nature being nature, and every child born to grow up, I suppose. Learning he’s got, you say, and a way with him, no reason to doubt it. Well, well, no one shall say your old Nurse put a pebble in your path, although many’s the boulder would never be out of place in some I could mention.”

Nurse’s words were placid with the ease of victory.

What had she always said?

And what might not They, at Willow Hall, be saying now?

Flute was safe. Safe in Nurse’s keeping, as ever before ... ever before ... always ... world without end....

Nurse’s head was rocking above Flute’s now.

The fire gave a last whisper.

Cob, his last flop ...

“Bless us then!” cried Nurse, rousing.

270

“Here’s a time o’ night, and no one to see after the dear child’s bed. Come upstairs with me, Miss Flute. Ah! Now I’m very glad of something. One of those last little nightgowns of yours your Mother said to throw away. Well! I wouldn’t let them all go.... And a baby hair-brush ... just a few other little things They were always after me to pitch away.... Now you can see, my dear, what I’ve told you is true. Everything has a use if ’tis kept long enough, and it’ll come in again, very handy....” Nurse went upstairs first, with Cob trailing an agreeable leg beside her candle.

Flute, behind them, suddenly too sleepy to tell a close candle from a far moon, or the world’s deepest truth from a shadow over the wall.

271

Chapter Sixteen

FLUTE woke next morning to a Lilliput world. Matters of fact had shrunk to toy-size about her.

Nurse's little spare bedroom fitted the half-dreaming Flute like a toy-box just big enough to hold a treasure.

Flute lay, nearly awake, measuring herself against Alice in Wonderland.

Perhaps she, too, had eaten with Nurse's supper some magic stalk to bring her down from the clouds to simplest earth.

Last night she had been a woman.

This morning, a toy. Something ... in the image of a woman. Not a child again, but a marionette, perhaps, just waiting to be danced by Fate on its string.

Flute felt quite content. Altogether at ease.

Inside her toy-box who could touch her?

There was an ardent breathing outside her door, and Nurse's head round it.

"And so you are! Awake at last, me dear! Well, I never! Bless you for a sleepy head, and the good it'll do you, dear, warms my heart to think of. Now, here you are, and I wouldn't keep you waiting a minute for it, once you woke. Nothing at all but a letter from that young Robin. Still you was always one for a letter directly, and I will say the boy was up here, walking all over my garden to catch my eye at the window, and that so early I was still in me petticoat."

Flute sat up in bed, very soberly, and held out her hand.

You never believe your first love-letter. It isn't credible that what has torn your heart into ribbons can be real enough to write....

272

"It is just light enough to see, so I will write this. I was called by Miss Jane last night, and she told me you had gone out of Willow Hall, and not come back. She said not for either of us to fret. She knew you were with Nurse Withall, up on Nettleship Hill. I told her I'd be there with the first light this morning. And this evening, my work done, I must be there again. You know, I must, don't you? I can only say, this from Robin."

Surely it was only for about two minutes that Flute lay, with her letter clasped to her breast, just waiting for the first unbearable sweetness to pass before getting up to scare a sparrow peeping in at her from the outside window?

* * * * *

Nurse's daily life was as regular as the ticking of her clock, and the cottage pleasantries of it, as charming as a gay secret, whispered.

Here was a play-life, real and quite unbelievable.

Nurse and Flute had breakfast, with Cob sitting on a chair between them.

Every time Nurse got up to admonish the kettle on the hob the table shook a little, and Cob bowed politely.

273

Nurse declared the queer creature looked better by morning light. She held quite a conversation with him while Flute was away, dreaming.

Flute, come back again, heard Nurse busy with the proper opinion that legs is legs, and trousers is the right thing for 'em, and how some cuttings of pink flannelette, upstairs, should come in, quite large enough, and a lot more suitable.

Flute played the morning away like a child. She followed Nurse about, with Cob in her arms. Waiting on all the comfortable explanations of Nurse's domestic machinery. Ran up the garden strip to the most engaging shed, half-earth, half-house, with a roof for the raindrops to come in at, a door to forget the key of, and a splendid little window presented by Nurse to all the spiders of the land.

Nurse did the housework of her cottage, trying to chase Flute away from any of it.

Flute, sent out to play in the garden, found herself skipping from leg to leg, and singing a song, whispered by Cob into her ear, and just the thing to salute the mild and fleecy sky.

There was no trouble anywhere. The whole world was cosy with peace.

Cob, become an accomplished magician, agreeable to pleasant spells all hand-woven overnight.

274

And this evening would bring Robin.

* * * * *

So, of course, there was magic everywhere.

The potatoes, boiling for dinner, appearing and disappearing like small white porpoises, and brewing amazing bubbles the while.

After dinner Nurse rested with a rug over her knees, and Flute's head there as well. Flute felt she could never sit on an ordinary chair again. It was so glorious to be free to crouch, to sit upon the ground. To hide underneath the proper height of the world she had always known.

Later, Nurse, Flute and Cob went for a walk. Just to pick up a few sticks along Nettleship End Road.

The walk was as safe as Nurse's cottage. Hedges thickened for their protection, on either side. Under the soft grey sky Flute's bare head went unproved, and each spraying twig Nurse or Flute picked up, designed a different spell to trace peace over the heart.

After tea came the dusk. In it Flute and Cob curled up together, while Nurse potted out in the kitchen, singing a constant hymn in praise of saints at rest, until it was time to sit down for a bit herself.

* * * * *

Cob was slipping out of Flute's arms. Farther

275

and farther down went Cob, still bowing amiably to his own and Flute's toes.

"Salutations," murmured Cob. "Sleepy ones, I admit, but still salutations. Ah! What a world it is, to be sure! Sure indeed! I'd like to see anyone made of calico cuttings who could be sure of it. No sooner does one settle down here, than some hot bony arm picks one up for yonder. They make all their own troubles and then want to know why. Expect an answer, too. I know I do what I can. Bow a bit, and so on, but it's not likely a sensible Clown can find any reason to them. However, I suppose one of these days one will be shabby enough to get thrown away into a little peace. Then, even little Flute will forget ... ah! flesh and blood never has been equal to calico yet ... and ... Oh! lor! Here's another of 'em ..."

* * * * *

It was only part of her dream. The part that wakes you to taunt you. Too lovely, too evanescent to remember. Why ... no, it wasn't ... why, it was ...

“Why! Have you been there long? Why didn’t you wake me, Robin?”
said Flute.

Robin knelt beside her.

“I couldn’t wake you ... like calling you

276

back from a far, lovely country. A country fit for you ... for a queen....”

He would always be her servant. Always try to wait upon her. Robin,
who saw her, far away, and she so near.... But never mind now. Never mind
anything but this.

“Won’t you sit down, over there, Robin?”

He went, very soberly.

Flute jumped up. Flung herself, and whirled Cob into his arms.

* * * * *

But Cob knew his place.

The floor. Forgotten. Against a sofa leg.

* * * * *

Robin sat on Nurse’s best horsehair sofa.

And Flute, in his arms, was almost afraid.

Again, Life had her, toys drew away.

This endless thudding of a heart at her heart.

These quivering arms, so much stronger than arms could be.

Flute, tugging at the queerest toy of all, had somehow touched a spring,
and set Life a-whir....

“Robin,” said Flute, rather faintly.

“My Flute ... for ever,” said Robin.

And Flute knew she had touched that spring for the first time and the
last.

* * * * *

Everything was so simple. It was all a

277

toy-simple affair, after all, so it seemed. Even yesterday ranged into a prim,
Noah’s Ark line.

“Yesterday morning, I know something snapped inside me. I just
couldn’t bear it any more. Seeing you. Loving you. Hearing you say ...

“And being helpless to love you, as a fit lover should.”

“So when my dinner hour came I went down, straight to Miss Jane.”

“I went into the drawing-room to her, and tried to tell her, and own to everything. I knew Miss Jane would never act hardly. But from how she would take my news, I should know how to go my way....”

“Miss Jane ... She spoke but little. Indeed, I could wonder what of it all she heard.

“‘I’m the boy, bred in your garden,’ I said to her. ‘Miss Flute, your niece, I love. And I should not be telling you this, without my love has no more the power to die. She’s as far from me as a gold tree-top,’ I said.”

“And then could no more with Miss Jane always looking away.”

“Miss Jane said, ‘You know Miss Flute is not Miss Flute, but Mrs. Edward Whayman, and all the money hers to be will never be

278

hers should she marry again.... Do you wish to marry Miss Flute, Robin?’”

“And I said, ‘I must marry her, Miss Jane, as the river must run to the sea.’ Miss Jane never answered. She got up and said, ‘Very well, Robin. Now I’ve heard what you say, you may go. This afternoon I’m visiting Mrs. Lemander.’ And, as if I were told, I knew Miss Jane was visiting Mrs. Lemander, in some way, for me. Quick as could be, I felt frightened, somehow. For Miss Jane is not fit for visiting or suchlike—although we, as know, are bound never to say....”

“‘Never go for me, Miss Jane,’ I said. ‘Harm may come. I’ll beat through my own bush, someday....’ I was at the door. When I looked back, Miss Jane was smiling. But she never bid me stay, so I was bound to go, then.”

Robin was rocking Flute, a little, in his arms. He told his story like a fairy tale. Piecing it together as soberly as a child placing bricks.

Then Flute raised her head to join him in his game.

Together, the dark head above the chestnut one, they took the facts of their toy-world to pieces, and built up the swaying, tremulous castle of what they should do.

279

Flute told her tale of Granny’s raging discovery, yesterday.

“She said all kinds of things, Robin. Dreadful things.... How can I ever care for Granny again? ... I wonder why she was so angry? Once she fell in love herself, and I’ve heard her say that no one could have turned her. She

would have gone to the end of the world with Grandpapa, just as easily as stayed in Withy.... But she shouted so, Robin ... wouldn't you think anybody who had known love would have known better than that? ... They all turned on me ... Bess and Aunt Jane, too."

Robin rocked Flute the other way, at this, and shook his head.

"Never Miss Jane. I'll swear so. Miss Jane must have known love, sometime, for she was never against it. If you could have seen Miss Jane's face last night when I went in to her, you'd never speak so, Flute. Miss Jane was sitting there, all by herself with the fire. She looked, as she does often, land of very far off, and she said, like to herself, 'Joy cometh in the morning, and peace ... peace to faithful hearts, and all rage put away...'"

"I used to think something like that about Aunt Jane, too.... Robin, when we're

280

married, you'll have to say, 'Aunt Jane' ... won't you...?"

* * * * *

They turned the bricks about. Built up their castle with all the bright colours of the bricks showing.

There was no need for disturbance as long as Granny did not come, plunging down into their plans from the top of Willow Hill.

Flute could stay with Nurse until Mum's and Dad's return.

Aunt Jane, and presumably Granny, knowing her safe, need raise no hue and cry.

Mum and Dad, home again, Robin should approach them.

Assure them that nothing they could say would make any difference....

Flute and Robin would sail to Trinidad, with all the hopeful love in the world, and all the money Robin had been able to put aside, out of small private tutoring jobs, while at college.

This impressive sum, surely, would reassure the most anxious parent....

To Flute, in Robin's arms, to Robin, his senses lost in Flute's hair, no doubt on this score could be detected....

"And until we go, Flute ... why! that's a strange thing ... Miss Jane must have

281

... for listen, my heart, to me. Last night—and me knowing nothing of how Mrs. Lemander had been with you—last night, before I left Miss Jane, she

said, ‘And, Robin—I must ask for one promise from you. A faithful promise, not to leave Mrs. Lemander’s garden until such time as the word shall come from me.... From me, Robin,’ says Miss Jane, ‘ not from her ...’”

How lucky to-night was toy-time, all given over to the impossible!

For the curious difficulties attendant upon Robin’s promise were as nothing to two people, busy about the most engaging game in the world.

Granny might raze Willow Hill to the ground, dismiss her gardeners, be forced to retain them by Aunt Jane, surrender her own will, never mutter a protest ... it was all one to Flute and Robin ... the game being theirs, and each one’s turn, at once, to play.... They built up their swaying, tremulous castle, brick by brick, the most solid affair in the world.

“Every day you’ll come and see me, Robin, after your work. Perhaps, one morning, you’ll write to me again.... I shall stay here, quite happy with Nan and Cob, waiting for you. And when we sail away together, oh! Robin, how lovely it will be!”

They sailed wonderful seas together, sitting

282

there on Nurse’s sofa. They sighted magic islands, in the speckled looking-glass behind Nurse’s clock.

Everything in the world was theirs except doubt and distress.

There are only three true magic things in the world—happiness, carefree laughter, and love. And these were theirs.

Then they changed their toys. Took up beads instead of bricks.

Told over all the tiny scenes that had made their love-story up to now.

In the bright beads they saw themselves in vividly coloured miniature.

Their meeting at the Toy Fair.

Their meeting behind Granny’s mantled back in the dark Christmas garden.

Those other garden encounters.

Their ghost-meeting throbbed over by the muffled peal.

They spoke of the garden that had sheltered them, the way that bush had kept their kisses a secret, the wonderful way the sun had shone for them alone.

They jewelled the whole world with their memories, and then forgot memory because the present is here....

“Here? In here? Why, Miss Flute, wherever are you? Bless the child, all in the

283

dark.... And upon my word ... well, I never.... So this is your Robin.... My dears, do you not want the lamp lit? 'Tis over time for it.... Oh! Miss Flute, do but look at your hair....”

Nurse’s own delicacy refused to allow her to look at either Flute or Robin, more than necessary.

Nurse looked all round the room instead, with a tidying eye, for, certainly, there was something, well, a bit put-out about the atmosphere of it.

But all Nurse could detect of material displacement was Cob, forgotten against his sofa leg.

“So the comical creature’s got himself down here now. Ah! well, there’s no knowing where we shall all find ourselves next. Miss Flute, do you and your Robin stay here while I see about supper. ‘Tis past time for it now, I’ll warrant we’ll find, directly we light up and look at the clock.”

The lamp was burning well already, but Nurse’s tact instructed her to speak as though darkness still veiled Flute’s bright eyes, Robin’s pointed questing smile....

* * * * *

They had supper together, very gaily, all four of them. Cob, opposite Nurse, the hero of the hour. Nurse, on hearing how Cob had

284

understudied Cupid, looked at him quite respectfully, and spoke of velveteen cuttings as more suitable than flannelette, for trousers....

* * * * *

So started a week, cut out of a dream. It was hard to believe that these gaily painted hours were just every day.

Every morning Flute woke to a letter.

The rest of the day slid by very easily into the evening, when Robin came.

Life held, breathlessly, and brilliantly as a soap bubble. Joy stained it, and no clumsy finger approached it.

There was no sign from the outside world. Granny never appeared, although Nurse spoke, prophetically, of dark clouds massing over Willow Hill, which was undoubtedly a sign of mischief brewing there.

Robin reported nothing at all. Mrs. Lemander only seen once, going very fast through the garden. No glimpse of Bess, or gossip of any sort from the maids indoors. Flute's absence had not been commented on in his hearing. Miss Jane was keeping her room, said Robin's father, with a cold.

The world hung in the balance for Flute and Robin. They weighed the balance down on their side with the weight of their love.

A week after her arrival, Flute woke to no

285

letter. She and Nurse hung the breakfast table with questions but no answer came to all their wonder.

Flute idled at the sitting-room window. The road remained empty, and the world a blank.

When Flute asked Nurse, for the twentieth time, what could be the reason, Nurse proposed a walk to her.

"Not that I can come with you, so early of a morning, and all my work yet to do, or hang behind with the cow's tail. Still, that isn't to say you shouldn't just take a turn along to Nettleship End, by yourself. Run along, dearie, and never be late, coming for your dinner."

Flute hurried a few impatient hedges past her. She climbed a gate into a very empty field, fretted at a robin calling absurdly to twig after twig. Picked up a few sticks for Nurse's fire, and hurried the hedges, home, faster than ever.

But, after turning the corner just before Nurse's cottage, Flute stood still. The road at Nurse's cottage door was blocked. Blocked largely, brightly, elegantly, by Granny's carriage. The Closed Carriage, noble and glossy, behind its glossy, portly horses. Shining all over with funereal splendour, and attended by Daniel's triumphant top-hat.

Flute stood before it, suddenly feeling the

286

common wind through the hair of her bare head. Conscious of muddy sticks in stained, bare fingers. Very conscious of a bubble burst somewhere ... the fingering world fumbling at her again.

The Closed Carriage, come in state. Inside it, Granny, seated upon the mighty seat of all the family's feelings....

But the Closed Carriage was empty. Daniel touched his top-hat at leisure. One of the portly horses moved a casual hoof. The harness tinkled a little, absently.

Flute stood behind Nurse's garden hedge. Voices came out to her suddenly as Nurse's front door opened. Amiable voices, professionally friendly.

Granny and Nurse, in confidential communion. What could have happened to swing the world about as suddenly as this?

"Ah! There she is, now. There's Miss Flute. I was saying, 'M, as I knew she'd be here in a minute. Miss Flute! Here, me dear! Here's yer Granny come up for you. For to drive you back to Willow Hall. Will you wash your hands before you go? Here, let me take them there dirty sticks."

What had happened to the world?

Nurse was all contented fluster. Urging Flute away, with the most cheerful air, as

287

though nothing could please her more than to do so.

Flute gasped.

Before she had finished Granny hurried forward to kiss her.

"Flute. Dear Flute. I—I shall be glad to have you come with me...."

In a dream, Flute saw Nurse's nods, and winks, felt one or two discreet nudges. In the same dream, saw Granny's face, turned, quite pitifully, towards her. What ...

"There, dear. 'Tis yer Granny, and wanting you, so ..."

Flute's dream lasted down Nurse's path, and followed Granny into the Closed Carriage.

There was Nurse's smile and wave over the gate to end it. And then Granny beside her, speaking her name as though from a long way off.

"Flute ... Flute, my dear. I came for you, as early as I could. I came at once to tell you ... Your Aunt Jane died last night."

288

Chapter Seventeen

THE Closed Carriage rocked a little in dignified sympathy with the rest of the world.

Aunt Jane dead!

How impossible it is to believe the simplest facts of life!

Aunt Jane. Why. What wonder that she should die? And yet here is the greatest mystery that ever man may puzzle over.

Aunt Jane, dead. Never to move, speak, keep silence, walk in her garden, visit, be visited, again.

Aunt Jane, still for ever. Her garden will grow into spring without her.

She will never see the rose fountains spray rose summer. Never watch tree-shade warmed with an orange radiance now.

The winter jessamine, on a windless night, is not so still as Aunt Jane.

Aunt Jane had seemed less alive than anyone Flute could think of. Always remote, in a world of her own, you would say Aunt Jane might easily slip out of life without any amazement.

And yet, Aunt Jane, dead, is the greatest wonder, the strangest thing to believe.

"I never looked for it, Flute. Somehow, Death is the last thing one thinks of for one's own people. And Jane, younger than I. There were only Jane and myself, you know, Flute ... Jane ... she died in her sleep."

Sleep, the most kindly thing of all.

Sleep, like silence ... Aunt Jane once said

289

—silence is beautiful ... peace, and grace of time.... In her sleep Aunt Jane must have met Death, graciously without distraction.

But Granny, distracted by everything she met, would never know that....

"I cannot believe it at all, Flute," Granny went on. "It doesn't seem possible. How can it be? Of course I knew Jane was very far from the thing. But then she always ailed and no great harm came of any of it.

"I was told she was keeping her bed with a cold. Of course, I thought nothing of that. Why should I? We never have worried over trifles in our family. And now, here, the last thing last night, young Robert Simmons, white as chalk, standing in my hall with a letter.... And Jane must have

been dead all the time. The letter ... she'd written it herself, three days before.... Oh! You could have knocked me down with a sparrow-feather."

"It gives me the creeps, now, to think of it. Me saying, 'Why, what on earth does Miss Jane want at this time of night...?' And all the time, Jane lying there...."

"I went down the first thing this morning, and went in to see her. You must come with me again, Flute. She does look so quiet and happy. Happier than ever I saw her face before. That Simmons of hers had got a lot

290

of snowdrops, somehow. I'm sure I don't know how he managed it. Whimpey says ours are very backward this year.

"Anyhow there was Jane, with flowers all about her. And that little green bird of hers downstairs, singing his heart out. You would hardly tell anyone was lying dead in the house, at all."

It was Granny who was playing with bricks now. Building up all these little things into the swaying, impossible edifice of Aunt Jane, dead.

Granny moved them about, one after another. How could it be? How could all these simple everyday little things mean night for ever for Aunt Jane?

It was Flute, now, who understood, putting toys away. Flute took Granny's small shaking hand, gently, and kissed a cold cheek through a chill veil.

"We mustn't mind, Granny. For Aunt Jane must be so happy."

"Happy?" said Granny, remotely. "Ah ... happy ... that's how she looked, Flute ... but happy ... I should never have thought, somehow, of happiness, and Jane."

Granny and Flute drove together in the Closed Carriage, through the world they had always known. Through the little narrow

291

streets, too narrow to show, even the sky above them. Up hills, down into valleys, up again.

They glimpsed tiny, miniature views, and lost them, directly behind a portly, glossy portion of horse. They drove along the ways they had always known.

The ways Jane had known too, but which, you would never think, had held happiness for her.

Jane, a single, solitary woman, knowing the Lord's will but no warmer delight.

Granny, bustling her wifhood, motherhood, widowhood, about, had never thought, really, how happiness could be, for Jane.

Life is so queer. Queerest of all, in its going. And they say Life gives us what we ask of it....! Ah! but then we do not hear our own prayers....

Perhaps, after all, Jane was only happy in Death?

It is easiest to believe that....

* * * * *

Flute and Granny sat close together, pulling the second best carriage-rug tightly about them. When it slipped a little, Granny pulled more feverishly than ever.

So they were protected against the world outside.

Granny held Flute's hand, and pressed it quite eagerly. She spoke eagerly, except of

292

their parting. Her words pressed that behind them.

Granny looked anxiously into Flute's face to beg for no trace of it there.

Granny, alone with Flute, was frightened....

But she need not have been afraid, for Flute was a builder of bricks, as well as Granny. She had learned, now, how tender are such tiny edifices, as humans can raise. And how, while they hold, it is better not to breathe.... certainly not to shout.

Flute and Granny were left, clinging together facing Death,

Better not recall a parting, with Death so near, who can part for ever....

The week that was between them, dropped away. Granny pretended Flute had always been here. She pulled the second best carriage-rug round all uncomfortable corners.

"I'm so very glad to have you with me, just at this time, Flute. You know Bess had to go?"

And "Home again" murmured Granny, on a sigh, as the Closed Carriage drove in at the Willow Hall gates.

* * * * *

Here, Flute was. Standing just the same as ever, in the wide hall of the old family home.

The gay morning light, sliding over the polished oak boards to meet her.
The great

293

carved oak chairs, made out of shadows in their dark corner.

Everything as it always had been, and Aunt Jane, who had always been the same, dead.

Granny turned to Flute, an odd look under her veil.

“It’s all just the same, you see, Flute....”

* * * * *

Would Cob the Clown have agreed, had Flute not left him with Nurse up at the top of Nettle-ship Hill, behind her?

* * * * *

Flute and Granny went all over the house together, hand in hand. Granny, peeping into one empty room after another, told each some piece of news, that she never addressed directly to Flute.

“This need make no real difference to me, of course, except for what I naturally feel.... I’m thinking of Jane’s servants, so faithful and devoted. Whatever one can do about them? I am certainly considering her Simmons in the garden. A reliable, sensible man. That young Robert of his.... All this business of letting him go to Trinidad.... I’m sure we have none too many good workers in our own country as it is.... Dear! Dear! ... I often feel sorry Jane never seemed to ask my advice nor want to talk over any matter with me.... It might have made a considerable amount of

294

difference, as I told her, that last time, only a few days ago.... What with the things she said then, and then her letter.... If only people could make up their minds to speak about these things quietly and reasonably, instead of being in such a hurry to think other people cannot understand.... Ah! Dear me, Flute, what am I saying, and your Aunt Jane, lying there, dead....”

Granny and Flute did not miss out one room, and each room received some scrap of news or reminiscence.

At last they came to the box-room.

Granny even peeped into that.

She sighed to herself.

“I don’t suppose you are old enough yet Flute, to realize how many things go. They leave no mark either ... at least, I suppose not. Perhaps people’s lives are like wall-papers. When they get too stained and faded, the people who live them cover them over afresh. I cannot quite help thinking that, Flute, sometimes, when I come in here. You see, no one cares to waste money on repapering a box-room. Look at those marks on the wall over there! I remember them ever since I was a child, younger than you are, now, by a great deal. That great stain was made by our old trunks. Mine always stood on top. I remember

295

that mark, so distinctly, when my trunk came down to be packed for my wedding tour.”

“I never could make up my mind to let the old rocking-horse go. Nor Jane’s skittles.... She didn’t seem to care to take them, when she went to Wych-elms, although I do remember she wished to have ...”

“What a long, long time it all is ago! But it doesn’t really seem far from the cradle to the grave, although people never stop talking as though that way went on for ever. Ah! Well! I suppose the thing is to have children to love, and be something to leave here, behind one, when one has to go.... Poor Jane! ... Flute, my dear, give me a kiss.”

They went into Flute’s bedroom to ensure comfort being there, first.

“You would rather have another eiderdown, Flute? The thick one I rather thought of keeping for your Uncle Henry? Now, you know, you only have just to say the word ...”

“How pretty it is to look out into the garden from this window. Dear me, I had no idea the trees looked so well from here. Those elms, meeting at the top like that. It’s a lovely day, too, the country looking wonderfully well, considering here we are, still only in January. Ah! My poor, poor Jane! And she’ll never see my garden at its best again.”

296

Flute and Granny stood side by side, looking out into the garden.

So clear and still everything was.

By its light, delicate colours the world might be made of glass.

Only a tiny trail of smoke coiled up, very slowly like a prayer, unlikely to be answered.

A far bell, whispered of faint hope, then fell to peace....

Granny roused herself.

“Flute. There are several things I feel rather inclined to say to you. But I think they had better wait until after your Aunt Jane ...”

“Everything has been going so strangely with me, lately. Upon my word I have been feeling put out for some time.

“That queer business of you and poor Edward. There always seemed something, not very comfortable about it, to me.... You, Flute, a widow! ... And then, suddenly, through Bess, for me to hear ...”

“My dear, your poor Grandmother often feels she’s hasty. I always was quick, as Papa used to say, while Jane ... However, I know one should strive to correct one’s faults, at any age. Still I must admit the shock was really enough to ...”

“Well! There’s one thing. All this talk is

297

idle, and not at all in place, with your Aunt Jane still above ground. That reminds me, I shall have to go down and see about ...”

Granny began to bustle the stillness of the day. But only for a short time. In between Granny’s shining activities little shadows of silence fell.

Granny would sit still, staring straight in front of her, for several minutes at a time. As she roused herself, she trailed ribbons of sentences. Flute caught murmurs of—

“Jane ... her letter ... why not speak of it before? And certainly Jane might know I should never be harsh about any true ... Well! Well! And to think that was the first time Jane had ever ... not a week ago, and now for Jane to be ...”

* * * * *

The quiet of the next few days was only disturbed by strange men coming up, at intervals, and waiting about Granny’s hall, to whisper so exasperatingly low in Granny’s ear, that the hall seemed to echo, “Speak up! Speak up, do!” whenever Flute passed through it.

Aunt Jane was to be buried as quietly, said Granny, as possible.

Still, Granny wrote quantities of letters, inviting the most casual of cousins to come to Willow Hall for the funeral.

298

Finally her own two younger sons agreed to run down for the day, and also those especial cousins Granny had hoped would not answer her

invitation.

The day that dawned for Aunt Jane's funeral was as bright and gentle a day as could come out, over the world.

Granny met it bravely at an early breakfast. Then she armed herself with a basket and spent most of the morning going about the garden looking for flowers that were not there.

Flute stayed in the house, chiefly in the hall, waiting, at Granny's urgent request, to dare Granny's new funeral bonnet not to arrive in time.

Granny and Flute dressed in such irreproachable time for the funeral-lunch, that they were forced to sit in the drawing-room for half an hour, opposite each other, while the sun outside grew strong enough to paint light shadow twigs over the lowered blinds

Granny sat, sunk in the past. Flute listened. Were those Robin's footsteps out in the garden? She roused herself to hope that no flighty mischance would show her light petticoat under all the ominous black in which she and Granny were swathed.

One could not, it appeared, mourn Aunt Jane deeply enough. Flute felt the colour of

299

her own skin to be frivolous. She dared not think of her hair.

At last the expected visitors arrived. They slid into the drawing-room, with sidelong glances to see what sort of sorrow welcomed them there.

Granny waved the blackest of mantles over each in turn.

As no one could be expected to lament Aunt Jane much at heart, Granny was determined that the outside of the funeral urn, at least, should be suitably draped in woe.

The funeral-lunch was very nearly festive. Uncle Dan and Uncle David constantly forgetting that they had not been bidden back to the old home to make merry.

Uncle David was deaf, and consequently often greeted Granny's sighs and low, emphatic whispers, with the wrong sort of remark, Granny, feeling vigorously after the right sentiments for the occasion, spoke, between deep sighs, of Aunt Jane's worth.

"You're right, Mother," said Uncle David impressively, "Aunt Jane. What was she worth? That's the question."

Granny, indignantly changing the subject into a request for David to cut the veal and ham pie, was not appeased by Uncle David saying, kindly:

“Quite true. You never can tell how she will cut up ... not till you know.”

300

Luckily all the cousins knew their places. And how little titters would become them.

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They all drove in great black coaches through the gay, soft airs of early afternoon.

Granny went first with the Uncles. Flute behind, with the first choice of the assorted cousins, who combated their own insignificance with sighs that would not have disgraced Granny.

The great black coaches lumbered through the gentle blue and gold day.

Was Death as hard and unyielding, then, as this? Death, that had come to Aunt Jane in her sleep....

Aunt Jane’s church stood on a hill-side. Its spire seemed taller than the hill itself. It reached, this afternoon, right up to Heaven. Up to Heaven it held a little bird, bright gold as a spring bud....

Down beneath the church spire, Death, Flute found had not, after all, forgotten to be gracious.

The great black coaches were left outside.

The church was full of sunshine, people’s faces, softened by tears, shed in memory of gentleness; there were a great many flowers, and music, rising everywhere.

“Blest are the pure in heart,
For they shall see ...”

301

The sunshine, not only over this world.

The flowers of Paradise, gold as earth’s winter jessamine. Know the garden of the Lord, where it is always blossom-time, where loving-kindness waters, and all tears are wiped away.

Music rose, out of the church, beyond the little gold bird, held up by the church spire, to Heaven.

“... my Angels, charge over thee ...”

Would the Angels, take charge of all the little loved things of earth, Aunt Jane’s flowers, and fruit, and birds that she had left behind?

“... that from their labours rest ...”

But Aunt Jane had never made a trouble of those things. And they only wanted such a little care ...

“... no sparrow falls to the ground ...”

Ah! Then it would be all right about the little green bird....

Music followed them out of the church. Out into the churchyard, gently sloped about the hill-side, past two chipped stone angels, who never looked up from the remnants of their own broken lilies to see Aunt Jane’s quivering flowers go by.

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Aunt Jane’s Simmons had made her grave just as she would have liked it. His head bowed, he stood, with Robin, close beside the

302

bank of snowdrops he had built over her grave-bank for Aunt Jane.

There was no need, even for a sigh, as Aunt Jane went down to rest, among the flowers she had loved.

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It was so still out here in the churchyard. Only the cries of a few rooks wheeling round the church spire intoned the afternoon. It seemed a pity that Granny’s sighs, the Uncles’ pompous coughs, the clergyman’s tenor words, should be bidden to disturb it.

The churchyard was welcoming Aunt Jane so gently—why must Fear always huddle about Death?

“I cannot bear to leave her. I cannot bear the thought of Jane lying there ...”

How often had Granny said, would Granny say, that? And Aunt Jane, under her flowers, still smiling a little....

There was a slight movement behind Flute. A tall shadow fell over the snowdrops.

Someone beside her.

Robin, there.

It would soon be time to go and leave Aunt Jane to her rest. Robin was close beside Flute, looking earnestly down into Aunt Jane’s grave.

Everyone must have moved aside a little. For Flute and Robin stood by themselves,

303

flowers, it seemed, all round them, looking down into Aunt Jane's grave, together.

Did a whisper go over the flowers?

Flute laid her fingers inside Robin's tightening arm.

"In the midst of Life, we are ..."

Flute heard it, and knew it....

Here, at the beginning of everything, she and Robin, together, waiting only for a few moments, to honour Aunt Jane's rest.

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They all walked back to the great black coaches very quietly. Granny had stopped sighing, the Uncles' pompous coughs passed away.

Flute and Robin walked together.

Uncle David glanced at them once, over his shoulder, otherwise surprise only faded in the mild gold air.

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The great black coaches drove heavily back to Wych-elms.

Uncle David, with Flute this time, and a few of the cousins, breathed a couple of embalming sighs, and eased his funeral top-hat, which was rather tight.

Wych-elms welcomed its visitors as quietly as ever.

The house stood as still as a house in a dream.

Only the river rippled and sparkled.

304

The sunshine, levelling to evening, showed no difference anywhere, except in the parlourmaid's reddened eyes, as she opened the door to guests, Aunt Jane would never receive.

Tea was laid, with the best tea-set, in the drawing-room.

Granny sat in Aunt Jane's especial chair, sighing for the importance of the occasion.

The cousins clustered, grouped themselves, drew out singly and in pairs, clustered again.

Granny poured out tea as she thought fit, and passed cups around, without idle inquiry concerning the recipient's taste.

The Uncles stood together, talking in low voices. They were only just beginning to look about them, appraisingly, when they were joined by a gentleman of whom no one had taken much notice before.

A gentleman, only remarkable because he bowed every now and then to Granny, and for the number of wrinkles surrounding his pince-nez. He seemed to be an adept at concealing and producing a top-hat. There was a rather desiccated look about him, a final air, as of illusions, well dried and put away.

Towards the end of tea, he started to clear his throat more and more definitely. At last he assembled his deepest wrinkles round his pince-nez, and spoke deeply into the Uncles' reddening ears.

305

Granny tossed her funeral bonnet and put down the teapot for the last time.

The cousins were found to be sitting about all over the room, looking expectant.

Aunt Jane's will was to be read.

Flute, feeling suddenly too young and a little lost, sat on the arm of Granny's chair. Granny, instead of reproving, groped for her hand, under the funeral mantle.

"I ... Jane Halliwell Hunting ... being ..."

Well! They said Aunt Jane had no being now.

"... my right mind ... do give and bequeathe ..."

It did seem strange, in Aunt Jane's drawing-room, to hear these emphatic words, that, living, Aunt Jane would never have said....

For no reason at all, the cord that had held Flute's attention so closely the last few days, snapped. She could no longer fix her mind anywhere.

Off floated her thoughts, now, in this strained moment, when everyone else almost hissed attention ... off ... to anything ...

The creeper-trails, tapping ghost fingers at the little green window. The fire, whispering to itself. The quivering jet in Granny's bonnet. The odd patting of Granny's quickened breaths.

306

Granny's fingers, closing nervously over her own.

The drone of the lawyer's voice ... a droning, like bees ... bees in a summer garden ... a garden ... sweet ... and cared for ... cared for by Robin ... Robin ...

Was Flute dreaming ... asleep...?

No. It was not Flute saying Robin ...

A dry, desiccated voice was pitching the name clearly at all those listening heads.

“... to Robin Simmons, son of James Simmons, sometime in my service, I do give and bequeathe all ...”

Someone, unseen, must have opened a window. There was a sudden, cold rush all through Aunt Jane’s drawing-room. No words came with it, at first ... just immense breaths,—the crackling of folding paper,—a silence, tight as a knot,—and then ...

Everyone was talking at once. Futile, cousinly chitter, deep gonging sounds echoing between the Uncles. Shrugs from the lawyer, more pointed than speech.

Only Granny and Flute kept silence. Flute, bewildered by a situation calling for some feeling she didn’t possess.

Granny, her small fingers tapping Aunt Jane’s chair like twigs ... like the creeper-trails at the little green window ...

307

Flute wondered what she and Granny ought to be doing. Obviously, something, other than keeping silence, under all these reddening, indignant expressions.

Already sentences beginning “Cousin Bessie, don’t you ... oh! Cousin Bessie! To think ...” were shivering, pointedly, about the air.

Flute, beside Granny, was coming in for her share of piercing, painful inquiry.

Flute squeezed Granny’s hand tightly. She would show Granny some sympathy—Granny, who sat there, stunned, perhaps—difficult as it was, for Flute felt like a sleep-walker through this strange scene.

“It’s you, and your Cousins Bess and Barbara, really to be pitied, you know, Flute ...” This barbed prick roused Flute a little. One of the Cousins, determined to get some sort of satisfaction ...

“Granny,” said Flute clearly, “Granny dear, would you like to go now ... or what ...”

Granny was taking no notice of anyone. She was getting up, slowly, out of her chair. Granny’s every jet spray shivered with decision.

“Mr. Maybury,” said Granny, very slowly and distinctly. “In my opinion, there’s but one thing to be done. Have young Simmons out of the garden, in here, directly. Let him know at once ...”

308

Mr. Maybury produced yet deeper wrinkles to accommodate his pince-nez.

“Exactly, Mrs. Lemander. Quite. Precisely. There is only just one thing.... Before we call on Mr. Simmons I should like to ...”

Granny flounced about, imperiously.

“Daniel! David! Let Robert be fetched at once....”

Mr. Maybury’s cough was as delicate an interruption as could possibly be desired, but Granny took no notice.

She almost stamped her foot.

“At once, David.”

“Right, Mother. Naturally ... Of course ...

Uncle Dan followed Uncle David out of the room. The atmosphere eased off a little. Shrugs replaced speech.

The cousins clustered among themselves. Words such as “Entirely,” “Incomprehensible,” “Inevitable” and “Exactly” shouldered their way through sharper expressions.

Backs clearly decided no more to be said....

Only Flute went on feeling much the same as ever.

So much of this world’s wealth had overpowered Flute, formed a background for her, floated above her head, and dissolved, in the stress of real life, like mist, that little of it

309

made very stable matter for her distress or pleasure.

Granny sat down again.

Her fingers and the creeper-trails still tapping ...

Now, Uncle Dan and Uncle David were opening the drawing-room door.

Back again.

In the middle of the drawing-room floor stood Robin.

He stood there, his hat in his hand, bowing a little to Aunt Jane’s chair where Granny was sitting.

He was tall and graceful. Attentive to courtesy. Gracious, because of such simple, gentle bearing. Wonderful. And he smiled at Flute for all the world to see....

Then Flute felt Granny, beside her, taut and vivid. Sitting there, with her head bent a little. Just as though she were listening intently to a voice rather difficult to hear....

Granny said, "Robert, I had my way. I sent for you, at once. You should know, at once, Robert Simmons, that you are my sister Miss Hunting's heir.... You are now a rich man, Robert. Your path has changed. Your duty lies differently before you. Miss Jane, were she here, would say ..."

"One minute, if I may be allowed it. One

310

minute, may I beg?" Mr. Maybury was unfolding Aunt Jane's will again, and looking as legal as hereinunder.

"Just one moment. A codicil. I should have wished to read it to you first, Mrs. Lemander, in private, but since you have already acquainted Mr. Simmons with the rough outline of the terms of Miss Hunting's Will. May I therefore be allowed, before we proceed further, just to ... h'm ... h'm ..."

"Dated this day, January 10th"... h'm ... h'm ...

Not, precisely, a matter of great importance ... just you might say, a wish ..." that all matters concerning my estate be definitely settled by the day of the marriage of the above Robin Simmons with my great-niece, Flute Harriet Whayman ..."

"Miss Jane, were she here, would say," continued Granny, as though no interruption of any sort had taken place.

"Your duty, Robert, lies quite straight before you. No nonsense about it, or any rushing off to any outlandish place."

"Miss Jane meant, and I look to you to stay sensibly at home, and take a proper interest in the life of our Town. I'm sure it needs all the help and interest it can get. Robert! Not for nothing have you spent much of your

311

time in Miss Jane's and my gardens. And now, you are going to marry Miss Flute, we can but hope you will do us both credit, and make a really good showing for it."

312

Chapter Eighteen

GRANNY said they had better take a basket. Not that it was very much of weather for wandering about a garden, now, when any minute might bring a sharp, early Spring storm.

But still, you never know when a basket may not come in handy. Be careful, now, Flute, if you take that one. Let Robert carry it; I'd trust him to take care before you. And the handle of that basket you've got has never really been reliable since it broke across the top, and I had to fasten it up with string. So both of you, be careful....

Granny shut the front door, upon her last syllable. There! Had she not said so? Another of these sudden storms, and those two absurd children out in it, going down to Wych-elms, with only one umbrella between them. And Granny's good basket ... would they ever pay heed enough to prevent it getting wet...?...

Granny tapped the hall window and shook her head at the gay smiles, under one umbrella, outside.

Flute and Robin went on down the drive, under the great trees, that dripped silver blessings upon them. The trees were not too busy for that, although in their highest branches, already, one could hear them tuning up for the first symphony of Spring.

The rain came dancing, out of the west. In a mocking chassé, it invaded the very little room under Robin's and Flute's umbrella. There, it made merry over warm smooth cheeks.

Raindrops are cold.

Kisses, to dry them, are warm.

The road down to Wych-elms was deserted except for Love, and the silver flowers that spring up in a magic minute from a glittering, rain-wise roadway.

"Here we are," said Flute, with a little sigh for journey's-end at Wych-elms gate.

Wych-elms, with its gate ajar, looked quite quiet and contented in the Spring rain. Rain-drops hung in the trees, and fell eagerly over the still quiet garden.

Opposite, the river pulsed into its most vivid season. The rain raised up tiny silver flowers all over it, or fell more gently to trace wide circles like

the water-lilies of a warmer day.

313

Flute and Robin waited in the porch while a bell rang deeply, far inside the house.

Aunt Jane's parlourmaid let them into their kingdom with a smile.

She eased Flute of her wet coat and hat. Smiled over the dripping umbrella at the glow of Flute's tumbled hair ...

"Where shall we go first, Robin?" asked Flute.

* * * * *

Wych-elms was waiting for them, just the same. Flute and Robin had decided, nothing to be altered here.

Aunt Jane might have come out of any room to greet them. The children whose happiness she had made, and who could only thank her by keeping nearly to her ways....

The house did not feel at all cold or lonely. In the drawing-room, the gold frames of the smooth saints attended them brightly.

There was a polish of well-being about the dark hall chairs.

One of the servants was crooning a contented song of the house, somewhere, away at the back of it.

In Aunt Jane's morning-room a brisk young fire kept company with the little green bird.

"Say 'Very Good Day' to Flute and Robin, Richard," Flute invited.

314

Robin inserted a considerate finger-tip among the little painted feathers of Richard's beard.

Richard generously inspected Flute and Robin, allowing a different eye for each of them.

He then extended the beak of good fellowship to Robin's finger, and wiped that beak, very definitely, upon it.

Unable to express his satisfaction sufficiently, he cleared his speech of any commas, and allowed it to follow Flute and Robin all over the house.

Flute and Robin climbed the festooning staircase at the back of Wych-elms hall. It led them, entwined, into deeply shadowed slender passages, ending in unexpectedly large rooms.

Flute and Robin went all about their kingdom. They clasped hands over the past.

They kissed in the present.

They spoke, both at once, so eagerly of the future.

How they would live at Wych-elms, keeping a fire, warm, at its heart.

How Robin, if he must needs see Trinidad fade away over the sea, at present, would make ardent study of the lore of living ... raise, protect, bring strange plants to perfection.

Raise and protect enthusiasm for his work in all the neighbourhood.

Bring ... who knows? ... Some new marvellous facts to light ...
empassion the

315

whole world ... and take care of their own garden ... Aunt Jane's ... Flute's ... his ... and to be the most glorious garden the most travel-stained eye could ever see....

Flute and Robin talked over their plans together. Both at once, to tell the truth, which, to tell the truth still further, is often the best way with plans.

They wandered all over Wych-elms, sometimes seeing it, sometimes seeing only their happy future, here to be.

At last they came into Aunt Jane's bedroom.

Where, one day, who knows...?

To-day, Aunt Jane's bedroom was still in waiting to her, as it had been yesterday.

A large room, the great mirrors in its vast mahogany expanses, seemed to stretch it away into a room without end.

What a spacious point of view must have allowed for those immense surfaces!

There were acres of wardrobe, hectares of washstand, a monument made a chest of drawers. There were curtained and coverleted square miles of bed.

Nothing of Aunt Jane's had been moved away, yet.

"Yes, we will, soon," Flute promised Granny. But so soon the day promised to disturbance slipped away....

316

Only one thing was altered.

Since Aunt Jane's going, Cob had come to sit agreeably in the rocking-chair by the window, where Aunt Jane used to rest, sometimes with a rug

over her knees. Cob looking very alert and rocking the shadows a little when no one was there to see.

Now, Flute went over to the great wardrobe mirror, and shook her head at her tangled hair.

“It’s shocking, Robin, and nearly all your fault. How could you...? Oh! don’t dare to start all over again ...”

“Now, Robin, what did I say ... Let me alone ... I’m busy.... Look! I’m just going to see inside the top drawer, here.... Oh! you needn’t go ... you can help me, Robin....”

The wardrobe doors swung back with a solemn air. The shelves they revealed were full of Aunt Jane’s modest daily affairs.

Two bonnets on little stands. A garden hat with a stained and turned ribbon. A pile of quiet, placid shawls. A clock, chronically unable to go, but belonging to a generation that never cast out.... Some skeins of charity-grey wool peeped from a basket. An embroidered scarf had a sheet of tissue paper. Two sly bottles of lavender water peeped behind the shawls....

317

Beneath the shelves, the deep drawers had known no opening since Aunt Jane’s.

Flute and Robin stood, hand in hand, looking into Aunt Jane’s wardrobe.

There was no sound at that moment in all the house, except the tripping rain notes of another storm against the window-panes.

Still Flute and Robin stood there, while the storm, fell silent, started again. Now, its key was altered, it rang out more deeply. Early Spring storms have each a different song to sing.

Flute put out her free hand slowly. She slowly pulled open the top drawer of Aunt Jane’s wardrobe.

“I—we ought to see ...”

At the top of the drawer was an apron swathed round something.

There must be paper underneath it. Something rustled to Flute’s touch. Someone had put something away with great care....

There it was! Lying there smiling. Its eyes closed....

The Doll, once Granny’s, that Aunt Jane had taken with her down to Wych-elms, long ago. The Doll, lying there, beautifully dressed, just as when Flute had last been allowed to see it.

Aunt Jane had made the dress. How beautifully she had sewed! See those tiny tucks ... that lovely little bonnet, above them.

Granny had always said Aunt Jane never cared for Dolls. Or animals. Or anything in particular. Just watched other warmer children playing....

Why, then, had Aunt Jane kept this Doll so long, and so tenderly?

There the Doll lay, smiling.

It must have smiled like that all through these years.

What did it smile over?

Children's secrets? Fancy secrets?

What no Doll can know ...

What nothing but a Doll can know ...

Something, perhaps, that no one suspected.

Not so unlikely with a Doll that has outlasted childhood, maturity, all change, even Death, now ...

Oh! It looked like a live creature with thoughts of its own, that, in one minute, it would no longer trouble to conceal from Flute or Robin....

It should go on smiling. It should go on smiling for ever.

Children, babies to come, should be taught tenderness and respect towards the Doll, who was a symbol of all the fanciful, fragile tenderness of the world....

The toys, the gentle, tiny things, that attend

man, wistfully and often, for his comforting from his cradle to his tomb.

The children who were coming to the wide rooms and slender passages of Wych-elms, should learn with laughter that it's the tender thing that matters, which Aunt Jane had protected from her world, unbelieving anything out of its ordinary way.

The sort of Love that starts lightly as a feather floats.

The kind of consideration no roughness of earth can push away.

A gentle heart that echoes the least whisper, but never the loudest shout.

* * * * *

A little shiver ran over the stillness of Aunt Jane's bedroom.

In it several things moved.

The last raindrops, quivering upon the window-pane.

Robin's arm round Flute's waist, his kisses upon her hair. His heart to hers.

And Cob the Clown, over in the rocking-chair, bowed most agreeably, although nobody took notice enough of him to encourage him to say:

“Well, why not? Have you anything against it? Of course, I’m only a calico Clown, but a happy ending seems all right to me....”

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About the Author



Margaret Elizabeth Lisle Trask (born Bath, 2 January 1893; died Frome, 25th January 1983) was an English writer of romance novels.

Betty Trask was born at 3 Park Lane in Bath, the daughter of William Trask (1859-1949), Chairman of Ham Hill and Doultong Stone Quarries who played cricket for Somerset, and Margaret Stancomb Trask (1863-1957), daughter of Philip Edgar Le Gros, joint owner of Frome Silk and Crepe Mill. Her cousin, Philip Walter Le Gros (1892-1980), was also a notable cricketer.

Betty Trask published her first novel in 1928, called *Cotton Glove Country*, when she was 35 years old. She then published at least 32 more novels until 1957, an average of one a year, which were published by Hodder & Stoughton, Collins or Robert Hale. She also published short stories in *The Royal Magazine*, *Woman's Journal* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

Between 1935 and 1952 she also wrote 22 novels under the name Ann Delamain which were published by Constable, Collins and Hurst and Blackett. Only one short story is known under this name, published in *Everywoman's* in December 1939. The name Delamain means 'of the hand', perhaps referring to the means by which she made her living.

In the five years between 1935 and 1939 Betty Trask published four novels every year. None of her novels are currently in print.

Betty Trask lived in London with her parents in the 1930s until early in the Second World War when their house was damaged by a bomb during the Blitz, and they returned to live at her mother's family house at North Hill in Frome, Somerset. The family had sold the silk mill in 1926 after her grandfather, Philip Le Gros, had died. Her father died in 1949 and left an estate of small value, indicating that their circumstances had diminished. Betty and her mother moved to a small house on Oakfield Road in Frome, where her mother died in May 1957, the year that Betty Trask published her last novel. Betty lived there quietly and modestly in a small semi-detached house until ill-health forced her into a nursing home, where she died aged 90 in January 1983. Although she wrote stories about love, she was unmarried.

In her will Betty Trask made a bequest of almost £400,000 to the Society of Authors to fund an annual literary prize for a first novel, published or unpublished, written in English by an author under the age of 35, which must be of a romantic or traditional nature, not experimental. Because the sum available each year would have made the prize the most valuable in British literature, since 1984 the Society has awarded a Betty Trask Prize, typically of £10,000, to the writer of a chosen novel, and Betty Trask Awards of lesser amounts for up to six other novels.

Betty Trask's life as a writer of romance novels, her bequest and her discreet life were celebrated in 1983 in an article in Spanish, *La señorita de Somerset*, in the Peruvian magazine *Caretas* by the Nobel prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa.

